Are they really at risk?

Students' stories of success

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Abstract

In 2011, as the year level dean for year 13, I was surprised and pleased to see a group of students complete their fifth year of secondary schooling, contrary to teacher expectations, and in spite of earlier signs of disengagement and struggle. Such students are frequently labelled “at risk” in our secondary schools. Truancy, lack of achievement, conduct issues, learning difficulties and health problems are seen as indicators of an at risk student by teachers.

Statistically in Aotearoa, Māori and Pasifika students and students from low socio-economic families tend to be overrepresented among disengaged or early leavers from secondary schools, and so being from these cultures, and being from a low socio-economic group becomes a “risk” factor. This can lead to assumptions among teachers about the students’ families, how parents value education, and even about the capacity of these groups to be able to succeed in education. A range of strategies and programmes have been implemented in an attempt to address these issues, including Te Kotahitanga, Ka Hikitia and the Pasifika Education Plan, Resource Teachers Learning and Behaviour, Restorative Practice, and more recently Positive Behaviour for Learning

While there has been a shift in such approaches from deficit of students to emphasising more positive attitudes in teachers, the perspectives of the students themselves are missing from the discussion about these issues. This study asks students what factors helped them to stay, and to achieve at least a level one NCEA qualification

The findings show that retention and engagement of “at risk” students requires careful attention to the quality of relationships across the school community: students, teachers and parents. They discredit some commonly held assumptions that “at risk” students and their parents do not value education and that teachers cannot support these students sufficiently. These quality relationships are respectful, responsive and tenacious showing a high level of respect for and interest in the students that goes beyond a teaching and learning relationship. It also suggests that the discourse of “risk” invites a disrespectful response to retention and engagement of students.

Preface

My father had been a teacher before I was born. I never got to ask him much about teaching because he'd died before my career began. I remember him retelling a few stories of very funny, extraordinary things happening in classrooms on ordinary school days. He expressed such joy when he spoke about the spontaneity, fun and connection that the young people he taught brought to his life for a time. He worked for a number of years as a teacher but eventually left the job. A story I heard more recently, was that he left because by his final years of teaching, the job have him terrible headaches.

I started my career with noble ideas of being a "helpful" person to society, of "changing lives" and I guess to share in the kind of joy from work that my father spoke of. In my first year of teaching, the life that changed was my own – I struggled, I lost my cool with the students, got sworn at, sometimes I hated school, sometimes it felt like I had a headache of the soul. I'd heard all the advice: "don't even smile at the kids until Easter", "start out really hard, make an example of a few and the others will know for next time". On the other side my impression from Teachers' College was that if anyone misbehaved in my class it was because I wasn't well enough prepared, the work was too hard, too easy or too boring. I knew I wanted to teach but struggled to find "myself" in the job. I'm a big smiler for a start. My first two years of the job was working out how to marry my beliefs about the way people should be treated and how to get a class running well. It was hard work, some people (my colleagues and students) had to be willing to be respectful, responsive and tenaciously committed to my development. Now I'm so grateful that they were.

I had a form class that carried my name for my first two years of teaching – 9-10SG - the kind of class that was mentioned in staff meetings for their in and out of class antics. I noticed after a few months they had started to refer to themselves as "9 Sheridan Gray". I overheard them quoting me to other students and teachers starting with "Miss Sheridan Gray said…." One day another teacher said one of the students had told her that "we have to watch what we say in our class because Miss Sheridan Gray hears everything." I realised whether they were well-behaved in class or not, they had tied themselves to me and they wore my name as part of their school identity. I was their teacher, they were my class and we built that class up. We certainly knew how to put on a shared lunch (which 9SG claimed to have invented). I saw one of the students from that class a few years ago and she mentioned that one of the 9SG boys had become head boy. We both shared our pride that one of our own led the school. By the end of my time with the class I began to realise how much I knew them and could forgive their bad days and their mistakes, like they could forgive mine.

I moved on to another school. I began teaching in the fourth term – usually a nightmare time to start. I loved it straight away. When I reflect back on why it was so much easier, I never had that anxiety about who I was as the teacher. I was much clearer about how I could be myself in the role of the teacher. I think I smiled at my students the minute I met them. I enjoy the classroom – the laughter, the moments when everyone's on, when we're all in the learning together.

I stayed at my second school for six years. I became a dean of a year group and started them in the school in Year 9. They have just left at the end of Year 13.

While I love the classroom, this longstanding pastoral relationship (over five years) has made me feel a sense of connection to my students in a different way. I've watched them develop into young adults from the children I first met those years ago at primary school. The job was taxing at times: the colleague complaints in all of my free periods about "your kids" in their junior years, the constraints of school systems like timetabling, the worry for the young people we send out into the world of risk who go out in weekends, think they're pregnant, pick up STIs, get beaten up, beat people up, take drugs, drink too much, run away, get bullied, bully people, have nothing to eat, eat too much … Yet it's been one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. In this time they also played together, told outstanding jokes with precision timing, supported each other, learned things they never thought they could, did things they never thought they could, made their teachers proud, made their parents proud, made themselves proud, met goals, overcame perceived failure, found ways through conflict, listened to people, spoke honestly even though it was hard, were willing to change... To see them grow up and to realise they are and will be alright (in spite of so many perceived risks and some dire mistakes) gives me hope.

My decision to be a teacher was one of the heart and the head. The journey of learning to teach for me has been one of finding my identity as a teacher (and in part as a person), finding my place to stand in my work and nurturing my mana[1] so that my potential can be reached. All of this happened in relationship not in solitude. I have a bank of memories of those years, those people. Some are good memories and some aren't but all reflect the richness and complexity of our

[1] Mana – sense of integrity

lives, our people and our time together. I can articulate now what I couldn't when I started teaching: I wanted to teach people, not just content, and my anxiety came from having very conflicting messages about what good teaching was. My early discovery was that the relationships we build at school will be the path to the greatest joy and reward. And that has made all the difference.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the very special people from the year group I've followed as a dean, for the sharing of their stories with me and with anyone that reads this study. Their stories are utterly personal and they have entrusted me with knowledge of their lives (as a researcher and a dean). I would also like to thank Wendy Drewery for being an inspirational mentor who has shown unwavering support for this project and has held the belief that these voices should be heard. I would like to acknowledge Kathleen Kaveney and Maria Kecskemeti for their rigorous discussion, care and friendship; and my family and friends who have shown support, awhi, interest and perseverance throughout this journey. I would also like to acknowledge my past teachers and students (in and out of educational settings) and those who have passed whom I carry with me.

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Chapter 1: Are they really at risk? Students' stories of success

Secondary school is a place where students enter as children and leave as young adults. It is a time of forming identity and finding a place to stand in the world. As a year level dean of Year 13, in 2011, I had watched a large group of students move through five years of schooling and leave at the end as young adults with qualifications. In this year there was a smaller group of students who I was surprised to see still at school and having gained qualifications. These students had faced significant difficulties during their secondary schooling and as a teacher and dean had come to my attention because of issues of conduct, illness, truancy or learning difficulties. On reflection, my surprise may have been unfounded as on interviewing these young people they had a wealth of support behind them in their educational goals. This realisation served as a challenge to my assumptions as a teacher, and I have been chastened to realise how much care is needed in the way schools treat young people, their experiences and their mana. Educators have both the power to label and the power to offer support. We also have the power to withdraw that support and lower expectations of particular students and groups. These young people, in my year group, remained at school and gained qualifications in spite of the more negative possibilities others may have expected for them. This prompts the question: How do schools support students to stay at school when they are in the category "at risk"? The theory seemed to be rather gloomy on this question, and so I thought I should ask the students themselves. In this research, therefore, I am interested in the life experiences of young people who have successfully negotiated this label and the difficulties behind it.

Risk Factors and Risky Behaviour

Many students encounter or live with risk factors or partake in some form of risky behaviour during their adolescent years and many come out with positive outcomes. Rather than viewing risk as fixed factor or state, it is more realistic to see factors and risk as more transitory and sometimes people may be more vulnerable to the risk factors in their lives than others (Bowes & Hayes, 1999). Risk factors are usually classified as *individual factors*, for example anxiety, low intelligence, poor health, hyperactivity; *family factors* such as parental ill-health, parental conflict, loss of parent, disruptive siblings, or *community factors*, such as economic disadvantage, poor housing (Coleman & Hagell, 2007). These factors can be cumulative, for example, poverty may lead to relationship difficulties in the home, and as they accumulate such difficulties may have a greater impact on the young person (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). Along with risk factors in one's life, there may also be risky behaviours present, such as drug use, truancy or risky sexual behaviour.

People also have a number of protective factors in their lives. These factors work as a foil or balance to the risk present in a person's life, offering positive possibilities and in some cases, agency or the ability to take up power and decision making rights in one's life. Research on resilience suggests a range of protective factors support young people through times of challenge, including overall cognitive functioning, a sense that it is possible to cope with challenges, the opportunity to make decisions and to learn from mistakes as well as successes, and warm, supportive relationships, (Rutter, 1985 as cited in Bowes & Hayes). Other factors are meaningful involvement in one's community, experiences of social justice, access to recreation, education and vocational opportunities (Ungar,

2004a). Resilience literature suggests that school can be strengthening for many young people, offering many of these protective factors to young people. Ideally it would be a place that nurtures students' resilience. Resilience can be defined as the achieving positive outcomes in the face of risk (Kirby & Fraser, 1997) or as an outcome from negotiation with environment for resources to define one's self as healthy amidst adversity (Ungar, 2004, p. 344). The difficulty with much of this literature is that it is easier to measure the impacts of risk and protective factors and assign resilience or success in theory, than in reality.

Students at Risk of Disengagement or Dropping out

The Ministry of Education has concerns about the disparities in educational outcomes across New Zealand. Research has shown that outcomes are better for students who stay within the school system for longer. Fergusson, Swain-Campbell & Horwood (2002) show that there are greater risks of alcohol abuse or dependence, drug use, crime, unemployment and delinquency for young people who drop out of school early. The Principal Youth Court Judge, Andrew Becroft, suggested that up to 80% of the young people coming before the Court are what he called "school failures", which he argued is one of the factors contributing to youth offending (Becroft & Thompson, 2006). It is in the public interest to keep young people in the school system to avoid these later societal burdens. It is also in the state's interest to produce socially able, capable young people who participate in their community and it is expected that school is the place where much of this social development takes place. On a policy and national level, improving school retention is essential to improving the population's wellbeing and the nation's economy. However on a personal level, it is not just a

place to learn skills and avoid delinquency, it can be a place that offers protective factors in what can be a risk laden time of life for some young people.

The government is particularly concerned with the disproportionate numbers of Māori, Pasifika students and students from low socio-economic families who leave school early, with fewer qualifications and are more likely to be disengaged with school (Ministry of Education, 2011, p 8-9). These concerns are founded on nationally collected annual statistics. In Aotearoa in 2010, 82% of students left school with a Level One NCEA qualification or higher. While this seems to be a reasonably high number, Pasifika and Māori students sit below this average with rates of 75.6% and 65.8% respectively (MOE, 2011b). 69% of students leave with Level Two or higher. Again Pasifika and Māori students sit below this average with 59.2% and 47.8% respectively (MOE, 2011c). The retention rate at school (defined as staying at school to the age of 17 or older), in 2010 was 83.7%. Māori students had the lowest rate of student retention at 70.3%, in comparison to 87.0% for Pasifika and 85.3% for European/Pākehā (MOE, 2011a). What emerges from this is, although rates of retention are improving, there is a large group of young people who are firstly disengaged and secondly leaving school with poorer educational outcomes.

Truancy is one of the key indicators of lack of engagement and New Zealand's statistics for that are somewhat alarming too. In 2009 the national absence rate (the average percentage of students away from school every day) was 11.5%. There are substantially higher rates of general absences (around 16%) and unjustified absences or truancies (over 8%) in New Zealand secondary schools (MOE, 2010). These rates of truancy and absence have increased steadily over the

last decade. Truancy has been frequently mentioned by young people who have dropped out of school as one of the poor decisions that they made that lead to the end of their secondary education (Meeker, Edmonson & Fisher, 2008).

Student engagement in New Zealand was measured in 2000 by the OECD Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) study. PISA tests are undertaken every three years across OECD countries, comparing aspects of education across them. This survey defined school engagement as identifying with and valuing education, participating in school activities (academic and non-academic) and having a sense of belonging at school (Willms, 2003, p. 8). The report shows New Zealand students participated less and had less sense of belonging at school than average when measured against their OECD counterparts. There was also a greater variability in the levels of student participation when looked at in relation to students' socio-economic background. The likelihood of students to participate less at school was at least one and a half times greater for students from low socio-economic families (Willms, 2003). This is indicative of a divide between students' socio-economic resources and their educational engagement, where students with more resources are much more engaged with school than those without.

While these statistics are important, there is also a greater likelihood for students from particular groups to feel marginalised within an education system that calls on traditionally European (specifically British) ways of delivering secondary education. Māori and Pasifika students are much more likely to have unjustified absences from school (Ministry of Education, 2010). These groups are much more likely to be stood down, suspended or excluded from school. Young Māori men seem to be a group particularly "at risk" in this area (Ministry of

Education, 2010a). When we put this data together we begin to see a picture of growing disparity between students in our schools.

Given this background, it becomes very easy for educators to think of Māori, Pasifika students or those from low socio-economic backgrounds as "at risk". This situation becomes one of perpetuating racial and class assumptions that are extremely detrimental to students who may already be facing more challenges than their more privileged counterparts.

These kinds of assumptions of deficit lead to a breakdown in the teaching and learning relationships within our schools, "… teachers cannot educate students in whom they have no confidence and students cannot learn from teachers in whom they have no trust" (Willie as quoted in Davis & Dupper, 2004, p. 185). Davis and Dupper (2004) discuss this phenomenon in the USA where ethnicity and socio-economic status can contribute to low expectations for these students from the education sector, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy of low achievement. These assumptions are present in New Zealand too. Otunuku and Brown (2007) discuss similar low expectations for young Pasifika students (particularly Tongan students). These students had high levels of self-efficacy but poor achievement. This was put down to teachers having a "feel-good" approach while expecting less of these students than students of other ethnicities. Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy (2007) in their large scale project – Te Kotahitanga - argue that one of the biggest risks to Māori students' academic achievement was teachers' deficit theorising of Māori and the mono-cultural classroom practices they maintained.

These assumptions are not just evident in discussion about who is most "at risk". There are also assumptions made about how best to help such students. A consultation report to The Ministry of Education (Tns and Monarch Consultancy, 2006) that compares early school leavers' and principals' perceptions about early school leaving illustrates differing understandings about student retention. The principals felt many of the students had families that were unsupportive of education and that curriculum adaption would be a key factor in improving student retention. On the other hand, almost half of the students surveyed (who had left school early) felt that their teachers wanted them to leave school and over half of them thought they would have stayed on at school if their teachers had been more supportive of them doing so. Of the things the students appreciated about school, contact with friends, learning, school subjects and school routines were the most important to them. It was clearly not an issue of curriculum adaption in the students' eyes. This consultation report is indicative of the mismatch between schools' and students' perceptions of what is helpful and what is not working. So it seems that the problem is not understood in the same way by all parties. For these early leavers, school provided protective factors for them and many of them wanted to stay. This is a story that is not heard often. There is an assumption that students who drop out did not want to be at school and their parents did not want them there either. This assumption seems very problematic and serves as an unhelpful response to disengagement.

While there is a problem with engagement and retention of students in New Zealand, there is also a problem in the discussion about it too. Statistics and patterns of disengagement, poor retention and lack of qualifications are important, yet if these are all that are heeded, deficit becomes implicit in the groups that are

not doing so well. Ministry of Education strategies and initiatives have tried to move away from a deficit view of students to more emphasis on teacher behaviours, attitudes and relationship building to bring positive change.

Ministry of Education Strategies and Initiatives

The Ministry of Education has a number of recent strategies and initiatives that aim to improve engagement, focusing on social aspects of school and relationships within the school context. These strategies and initiatives sit under the wider values of the recently introduced New Zealand curriculum such as: excellence, innovation, inquiry and curiosity, diversity, equity, community and participation, ecological sustainability, integrity and respect (MOE, 2007). A key aspect of this curriculum is participation – in learning, and learning in community. As Hipkins (2006) states, students need to be part of a collective as they learn and their participation should grow and change (p. 61). This has important implications for teachers, the way they teach and the way they relate to their students. This curriculum's values of community and participation, equity and diversity are important in the discussion about engagement and retention as this seems to be a key area for improvement in the findings of the OECD report on student engagement (Willms, 2003). By making these values core to teaching and learning, it would be hoped that students would feel a greater sense of belonging and participate more in their school community.

Ministry of Education strategies for Māori and Pasifika

In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education makes policy, ensures compliance, allocates financing and commissions research on the nation's education system. They introduce initiatives and set the direction of education.

The Ministry has released two strategy documents to combat the concerns for Māori and Pasifika achievement: *Ka Hikitia: Managing for Success/Māori Education Strategy 2008-2012* and *The Pasifika Education Plan 2009-2012*. *Ka Hikitia* aims to shift perceptions from deficit theorising around Māori achievement to a Māori Potential approach. One core value underpins the document – Ako[2]. "Within the strategy, ako comprises two important aspects: culture counts and productive partnerships, and is grounded in the principle of reciprocity where both the teacher and learner give and receive" (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 44). This concept focuses clearly on teacher-student relationships as being crucial to effective teaching and learning. Ako requires educators and the education sector to acknowledge two key aspects: that language, identity and culture count (valuing and respecting who students are and where they come from) and productive partnerships between Māori student, whānau[3], hapū[4], iwi[5] and educators will produce better outcomes for young people. (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5).

The Pasifika Education Strategy is less clear but acknowledges that the group of students that sit under the umbrella "Pasifika" are very diverse. This strategy calls for parents to be more involved in their children's education, that teaching should focus on achievement, that effective teaching and development be reviewed in relation to Pasifika learners and that teachers become familiar with Pasifika cultures and aspirations (Ministry of Education, 2009a). The core of this document asserts that a Pasifika student comes with strong sense of culture,

[2] Ako – to learn and teach
[3] Whānau – extended family
[4] Hapū – sub-tribe
[5] Iwi - tribe

language and identity and that the student should be central to teaching and learning.

Ministry of Education initiatives

A number of Ministry of Education initiatives are purported to improve engagement and retention for secondary school students. In the past decade Restorative Practices and Te Kotahitanga were used as relational models for schools to improve engagement (Te Kotahitanga particularly for Māori students). More recently the MOE has focused very keenly on "behaviour" and has invested substantially in a behaviourist model from the USA - "Positive Behaviour for Learning".

Restorative Practice

Restorative Practices in New Zealand became popular in the 2000s as a means to decrease suspensions and exclusions that had escalated at an alarming rate during the 1990s. A conference model was developed by the Restorative Practices Project Team from Waikato University in 2000. It was based on principles derived from restorative justice and the Māori huitanga[6] (Drewery, 2010). Since that time, substantial effort has been invested into the restorative conferencing model for New Zealand young people. It often takes shape as the Family Group Conference, a process formally used in Child, Youth and Family Services or Youth Courts (Bazemore & Umbrecht, 2001; Maxwell & Morris, 2006; White, 2003) or the restorative conference used regularly in schools (Drewery & Winslade, 2005; Hopkins, 2004; Restorative Practices Team, 2004).

[6] Huitanga – meeting process

The core belief behind this process is that it is respectful to all ("perpetrators" included) and that people are more likely to make change in their behaviour if those in authority work "with" them, rather than "to" or "for" them (International Institute for Restorative Practice, 2007, p. 1). With this at its heart restorative practices aim to clarify what happened through all participants' eyes, discuss the effects of the event on each of them and find a constructive way forward for all. This often includes a plan for some kind of action to "make things right" but also can include supports for participants to change behaviours. There are a number of other practices that are more informal that focus on respectful, reflective conversations e.g. restorative chats, circle times, class meetings and mediations (Hopkins, 2004; International Institute of Restorative Practices, 2007).

Drewery (2005) describes relationships as grounded in speech and action – "that speech is an action in and on the world" (p. 310). In education, relationships are built largely through speaking and it is through speech that we can enhance or take away mana from our young people. Drewery (2004) argues that the objectives of RP are to build a peaceful community where different people can live together, grounded in the belief that respectful dialogue is a means to build peace. Cavanagh's (2009) research in a rural area school in New Zealand suggested that relationships were the primary reason students attended and strived to do well in school. Margraine and Macfarlane (2011) describe these working relationships as equitable, caring and respectful. They argue that these relationships can be maintained through restorative practices, rather than exclusionary strategies that breed intolerance.

Te Kotahitanga

Te Kotahitanga – a research project that evolved into a professional development programme – aims to combat institutional deficit theorising of Māori by educators and the education system (Bishop et al., 2007). This project identified the following metaphors to develop pedagogy to meet Māori students' needs better: Rangatiratanga[7], Taonga Tuku Iko[8], Ako, Kia piki ake I ngā raruraru o te kainga[9], Whānau, Kaupapa[10]. When expanded out further, according to the programme, classrooms that incorporate these metaphors are places where individuals are respected and their mana is acknowledged, where learning is a conversation that participants can contribute and participate in, where parents and whānau are part of their children's education and where they can understand and support it. These classrooms display commitment, connectedness, a belief that others' learning is the responsibility of all and that all members of the class can participate in decision making.

Bishop et al. (2003) proposed factors that make up an effective teaching profile. The core understandings of effective teachers would be rejection of deficit theorising about Māori students and through this it is proposed they can bring change in the educational achievement of Māori students. It is expected that they would do this in the following ways: Manaakitanga[11], Mana motuhake[12], Whakapiringatanga[13], Wānanga[14], Ako[15] and Kotahitanga[16] (p. 96).

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[7] Rangatiratanga - relative autonomy/self-determination
[8] Taonga Tuku Iko - cultural aspirations
[9] Kia piki ake I ngā raruraru o te kainga - mediation of socio-economic and home difficulties
[10] Kaupapa - collective vision, philosophy
[11] Manaakitanga - caring for students as culturally-located human beings above all else
[12] Mana motuhake - caring for the performance of their students
[13] Whakapiringatanga - create a secure, well-managed learning environment with routine pedagogical knowledge and imagination

The aspirations of the Te Kotahitanga project are situated in the relational paradigm of Restorative Practices, that is, both approaches hold baseline values of equity, diversity, community and participation. Te Kotahitanga aims to engage and retain Māori students by changing teachers' ways of interacting with Māori students, and building class and school communities underpinned by democratic values. Both strategies are firmly grounded in a relational approach to teaching and learning. Te Kotahitanga more or less explicitly challenges teachers' negative assumptions about the cultural backgrounds of some students.

Positive behaviour for learning

Positive Behaviour for Learning is a recently introduced plan that aims to improve student engagement and retention through the management of student behaviour. Unlike Te Kotahitanga and Restorative Practices, it labels students by their "behaviour" and teachers are expected to manage behaviour not relationships. It links poor behaviour at school with poor educational achievement but also many negative social and personal outcomes. The Ministry of Education also links conduct problems with teen pregnancy and family dysfunction which they suggest will affect the next generation of children (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 6).

Positive Behaviour for Learning is aimed at students from Early Childhood to secondary school levels. However much of its focus is on children aged three to eight years, providing parents of students with challenging

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[14] Wānanga - engaging in effective teaching interactions with Māori students as Māori
[15] Ako - using a range of strategies that promote effective teaching interactions and relationships
[16] Kotahitanga - promoting, monitoring and reflecting on outcomes that lead to improvements in educational achievement for Māori students

behaviour courses in parenting (The Incredible Years programme) and professional development for teachers in classroom management, positive relationships, social skills – reducing anger, aggression, conflict etc. This programme is set to be introduced into low decile secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 2008a) as these schools are perceived as more likely to struggle with student behaviour. There appears to be an underlying assumption that students who are poorer do not behave as appropriately as their richer counterparts.

This model from the US has evolved from applied behaviour analysis (ABA) theory. The basis of this theory is that behaviour can be reinforced by giving it a positive response or stopped by removing provocation or positive responses to it. ABA focuses on behaviour because behaviourists do not believe that we can change students' thinking or feelings (Porter, 2000). Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (PBS) and Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) have a whole-school focus and aim to develop strategies that deal with behaviour before it occurs as well as plans to deal with it once it has occurred (Sugai et al., 2000). Practice is informed by empirical data that is analysed to evaluate the effectiveness of behaviour interventions and make decisions about further interventions (Sugai & Horner, 2002, p. 131).

This initiative occupies a very different paradigm of student engagement than that of the aforementioned strategies and initiatives. While The New Zealand Curriculum, *Ka Hikitia*, *The Pasifika Education Strategy*, Restorative Practices and Te Kotahitanga place students and the respect of their mana as a core value, Positive Behaviour for Learning places students' behaviour as its core concern. This leaves students out of the discussion about their behaviour and learning. This kind of approach to young people seems to be undermining of their mana, by not

taking into account their understanding and experiences of the situation. This places Positive Behaviour for Learning as contradictory in its values as there is not necessarily the stance of respect for students that the other initiatives and strategies hold.

The Current Study

This current qualitative research project aims to give voice to the young people who have been, either formally or informally, considered "at risk", and who, in spite of knowing this, have stayed at school into Year 13 to achieve qualifications. This group could have been the students who left school early but have managed to re-engage or stay with education through times of adversity. The study aims to find out what, if any, were the factors in school that helped these young people to overcome "risk" in their lives and at school. Most of these students came to be thought about as "at risk" informally, on the basis of issues with illness, conduct, learning or truancy that had come to the notice of the school. At that time, these "risk factors" were substantial, and were visibly affecting their lives. While much of the professional and research literature around risk and resilience considers both risk factors and protective factors that might counter-balance risk, most of this research is done from the "objective" perspective of the researcher or observer. Surprisingly, there is little that records the perspectives and voices of the young people who have been so categorised. Accordingly, this current study sets out to learn from students what they perceived as supports for their engagement and retention through secondary school.

"At Risk" – a Disrespectful Label?

To be labelled "at risk" can impact on others' views of a young person. It categorises students through dividing practices (Foucault, 1965 as cited in Madigan, 1998, p. 17). This segregates these young people from what is classed to be a "normal, healthy" young person, constituting an aspect of identity that they have not chosen for themselves. This naming or categorising of a young person could indeed become a totalising label or could result in a deficit theorising of them and their potential. This labelling can also impact on the young person's perception of themselves. As Madigan (1998) explains, 'problem-saturated dominant stories about oneself or others create a "perceptual lens" that influences the meaning that people ascribe to subsequent life events' (p. 25). Pierce (1994) describes a teacher's experience when she taught a class with a number of students labelled "at risk" – "she spoke of them entering the room with a 'loser's mentality'". (p. 39)

It could be said that being labelled "at risk" can undermine protective factors in a young person's life such as having a positive view of themself and their potential. To be labelled "at risk" predicts poor outcomes for the individual. It could be seen as a means to prevent harm, but it could well be a self-fulfilling prophecy. This labelling places a student immediately with negative possibilities and promotes low expectations of that young person, reducing the hope of their being able to manage themself or their life. So along with this low expectation, there is also an assumption of greater vulnerability.

The period from about 13 to 18 years of age is a time when young people begin to develop independence and take responsibility for themselves (Claiborne

& Drewery, 2010). Young people who can begin to be independent and participate in their own future are thus better placed on the road to maturity. Young people during their secondary school years are at the point in their lives where they can make the transition into being an adult who can take an agentive position in their own life and decisions. An agentive position is a position from which a person can make decisions about their lives and have some sense of control over what might happen in their lives.

> "I want to define agency in this way: persons who are participants in the conversations that produce the meanings of their lives are in an agentive positions. Through participating in conversation they have the possibility of making decisions about their own lives, by taking up positions that carry status as moral actors and producers of the conditions of their lives" (Drewery, 2005, 315).

This is, at its heart, what we would hope our education system encourages in our young people as they prepare for the adult world. It is possible that the categorising of a person into a group that holds negative connotations, low expectations and positions them as unable to help themselves, undermines their agency, their mana and their possibilities for the future.

Representation of teenagers in the media tends to be largely about "risk": taking risks, being "at risk". This paints a picture of young people reeling out of control and being very vulnerable. This can have problematic impacts on the way young people are viewed by the wider society and the way they view themselves. This classes them as "outside" of society and marginalises them from the community that is so crucial for them to feel a sense of belonging and value within. Claiborne and Drewery (2010) argue that the constant references to young people as "other" along with pervading negative perceptions has a very detrimental impact on our youth (p. 216-219). "Othering" silences or devalues the voices of young people and denies them the capacity to have agency within the

system. This serves to alienate this group even more from the adult relationships that they need so much at this stage in their lives and the positive, nurturing experiences of feeling valued and being able to participate meaningfully in their community.

School Community and Relationships

Schools can provide substantial protective factors for young people. Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher (2007) in their synthesis of literature about school environments that foster resilience, found that schools and teachers need to focus on building a community where it is safe to take risks, laugh and trust each other. Within this community environment, opportunities for students to establish positive relationships with peers and teachers serve as a protective factor in the lives of young people (Rutter, 1985 as cited in Bowes & Hayes). A positive school community also provides opportunities for young people to develop positive perceptions of themselves in relation to others, allowing its members opportunities to participate in a meaningful way (Ungar, 2004a). This kind of community would offer the possibility for young people to exercise agency in their lives and their learning. This would also allow young people to develop a sense that it is possible to cope with challenges, the opportunity to make decisions and to learn from mistakes as well as successes (Rutter, 1985 as cited in Bowes & Hayes).

Teacher/student relationships

Teachers' place in developing positive school experiences for students is widely reported as very important. Positive, respectful and caring relationships between students and their teachers are regarded as a major strengthening factor for young people at school (Bondy, et al., 2007; Brown, 2004; Gilligan, 2000;

Zamorski & Haydn, 2002). Martin and Marsh (2009) stress the importance of these relationships for developing students' academic resilience and academic buoyancy (students' ability to be resilient in the face of academic set-backs). Positive teacher/student relationships are characterised by trust and help to safeguard students as they experience challenge and develop coping mechanisms through this period of their lives. These teachers also develop classroom communities where students feel safe to make mistakes and learn from them.

Teachers' high expectations of academic performance and classroom behaviour are crucial factors which enable students to feel worthy and respected (Bondy, et al., 2007; Davis & Dupper, 2004). Attwood and Croll (2006) found that poor relationship between teachers and students was one of the key causes listed by truants for their truancy. Davis and Dupper (2004) have focused on school factors that have caused and prevented early drop out from school and found that poor relationships and low expectations were "pushout" factors for students who left school early. They stress the need for teachers to improve relationships and carry high expectations, particularly with "at-risk" students, to improve engagement. While many teachers may feel that they hold very high expectations for their students, often unspoken cultural assumptions can impact on the implied messages they give their students.

Clear expectations and assertive ways of expressing them are important in student/teacher relationships and convey teachers' high expectations in a way that is understandable to all students (not just those that are from the same cultural background as themselves who understand similar communication cues). A challenge for many teachers is to recognise their own positioning of power and

privilege in relation to their students and how that might manifest in their relationships with their students. Bishop et al. (2003) discuss how Māori students noticed different behaviour and expectations for them in comparison with their Pākehā classmates. Brown (2004) and Delpit (1988) suggest that teachers can balance cultural imbalances of power and undermine these assumptions by reflecting on how they communicate with all of their students. They suggest that teachers' use of a clear, authoritative and assertive way of speaking allows all students to know what is expected of them. Delpit (1988, p. 288) describes how African-American students could be left confused by what she calls "culturally loaded" instructions. Her descriptions of white, middle class ways of instruction ("Is that where the scissors go?") in contrast to a more direct style of instruction ("Put those scissors in the shelf") left many students unclear of what their teachers wanted them to do. This shows the awareness that teachers must bring to developing relationships with their students from diverse backgrounds and requires deeply reflective practice about what they say and how they say it.

In the New Zealand context, Hill & Hunt (2000), reporting on the AIMHI project on Effective teaching in low decile, multi-cultural schools in New Zealand, stated that the most effective teachers of students at these schools had positive, respectful relationships with their students. These teachers were observed and interviewed and students from the schools were also interviewed. The students they interviewed felt they must have a positive relationship with their teacher before learning could take place. They found the more successful teachers in these schools had high levels of self-efficacy, or a belief that they can invoke change and improve performance. With this strong professional identity these teachers could build better relationships with their students by practising

power *with* their students rather than exerting it over them. Such teachers are willing to understand where students came from, what their lives were like, and operate with reciprocity.

Class community

Class community seems to be a crucial element to improve students' sense of safety, belonging and participation at school. Pierce (1994) describes a teacher's purposeful development of a positive class climate for students who had been labelled "at risk". This teacher placed class climate as the priority before student achievement as she felt that students needed self-belief and self-esteem. Interestingly achievement improved also. Delpit (2006) discusses the importance of "creating a sense of family and care in service to academic achievement." She discusses Shade's (1987) conclusions that African-American students put more emphasis on emotional closeness, acceptance and feelings. Delpit's work is specifically around African-American urban students. However, in Aotearoa we have many cultural groups that value the building of community and acceptance into that community more than the individualistic paradigm which tends to dominate in European attitudes towards education. Community, and self within community, is an important factor for many cultures. The New Zealand curriculum also places priority on learning in community, calling for change in the way teaching and learning occurs.

Student peer relationships

Peer relationships play a large part in development through adolescence. However, the media reflect substantial concern and fear about the influence of peers on young people among the general population, to the extent that the phenomenon has a name, "moral panic", among developmental researchers

(Claiborne & Drewery, 2010). “Peer pressure” is a familiar term that holds very negative connotations, often linked to strange and experimental forms of dress, drugs, alcohol use, smoking, or even criminal behaviour. However socialisation is a crucial aspect of both school and youth. Experimentation is a normal part of the identity work of this time in young people’s lives. They select friends based around similarity, often this similarity is something shared that is valued as central to an individual’s identity. The selection of friends or seeking of a group to strengthen one’s sense of identity explains the tendency for young people to develop friends of the same neighbourhood or culture when they first enter a secondary school environment and are confronted with more diversity that they have previously experienced. These friendship groups have the ability to change or reinforce elements of a young person’s identity, including the way they approach their learning or school itself. Ryan (2000) lists three key ways peer groups influence the decision making of their individual members: information exchange and discussion, modelling and reinforcement of peer group norms and values.

It makes some sense that extra-curricular activities reflect key similarities between peer groups. Darling, Caldwell & Smith (2005) showed that students who partook in extra-curricular activities achieved better at school. They concluded that these activities provided opportunities to build identity and seemed to make school more relevant to participants. Friendships, group membership and peer acceptance correlate positively with students’ participation in school. In their investigation into whether peer relationships improved achievement, Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) found that students who were accepted socially did better at school. They thought this could be because these students got more academic help

from their peers and they may be more motivated in class as they felt a sense of belonging in the classroom. Conversely students who were not socially accepted did more poorly, but this was possibly because they were also experiencing levels of distress, loneliness and less positive perceptions of their self-worth.

The transition from primary school to secondary is a time of transition for students that tends to be associated with high levels of anxiety for students and parents. Peer relationships play a large part in this transition and many students fear bullying may be a problem for them at secondary school (Ministry of Education, 2010). Wiley, Hodgen and Ferral (2006) found that transitions into secondary school take substantially longer for students who did not already have friends at the school to ease the transition. Extrapolating from all of these studies, poor transitions into secondary school and lack of peer acceptance at this time are likely to impact substantially on a student's achievement, setting up a cycle of challenge (or failure) for their secondary years.

Teacher parent relationships

Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph (2003) in their Best Evidence Synthesis[17] for the New Zealand Ministry of Education indicate that most parents want to help their children succeed at school and that families with high expectations for their children's education have a positive impact on their success. They found that collaboration between home and school can lift achievement but this collaboration must be undertaken with care so that families feel respected and able to help their children. It is suggested that schools provide specific suggestions for practices at

[17] Best Evidence Synthesis – A synthesis of theory, literature and case studies in a given context, taking into account both quantitative and qualitative data.

home that will help their child's success. One-on-one contact was encouraged. Bull, Brooking & Campbell (2008) discuss these collaborations in more depth. They assert that successful home-school collaborations were based around the school taking responsibility for inviting parents and whānau into the school and into relationship with the teacher. Care must be taken to show parents and whānau that they are valued by the school and as key players in their child's learning. They also maintained that this partnership needed to focus around communication about learning between home and school.

Context of the Study

This study takes place in a specific school context. The school is very diverse culturally and socio-economically, with students bringing different values and backgrounds with them. Constructing a school climate where individuals can feel a sense of belonging within such diversity is a challenge. Yet, once students reach the senior years at the college, many feel that attending such a diverse school has been valuable to their development. Many of the teachers at the school also appreciate the diverse backgrounds from which their students come.

Pastoral care at the school is undertaken by all teachers with particular responsibility going to form teachers and deans. These staff usually began with a group of students as they entered the school in Year 9 and moved through with them until they left in Year 13. There is a focus on building safe and positive relationships pastorally with students and maintaining contact with parents and whānau to improve outcomes. The pastoral care relationships between teachers and students vary greatly between staff but some relationships very successfully balance discipline and care for the students. They include following up on absences, uniform, lateness, behaviour, learning and offer students a staff

member who can listen and assist them in many of the issues that they might face over their five years at college, including personal issues. This role often involves bringing parents and whānau, other staff and/or other students together to support students.

The school has a number of ways in which it is trying to attend to students' needs. One key initiative that aims to improve students' sense of community and improve teacher/student relationships has been the introduction of Restorative Practices into the school. It has been part of a three year professional development in Restorative Practices with a particular focus on class wide community building meetings. Its focus is on respectful ways of speaking, deconstructing discourses that may be unhelpful to learning and promoting respectful relationships between staff and students. A number of staff use the skills learned in this professional development to change their everyday practice in the classroom. This tended to change the way they dealt with students, their approach to student misconduct and conflict (Gray & Drewery, 2011; Kaveney & Drewery, 2011).

A key practice that has been widely used in the school is the class meeting. A meeting is situated in a circle that brings members of a class together with other interested parties (particularly other staff) to discuss a problem that may be occurring in the class. It requires all members of the community to speak and listen about this problem, how it affects members of the community, the exceptions or times when the problem is not present and personal commitments to keeping this problem out of the community. The key competencies (of the New Zealand curriculum) are frequently addressed in the meeting process and members

of the class will often be acknowledged when they have shown aptitude or improvement with a key competency.

This work is illustrative of the kaupapa[18] and values of the school. Due to its diverse population and some of the challenges that this might bring, the building of a school community that will value and accept such diversity is crucial.

The present study focuses on how, over the course of five years in secondary school, a group of young people who have faced substantial challenge and issues with engagement have stayed within the secondary school environment. These stories focus on the complex lives that students have outside of school and the factors within the school that have also impacted on their education.

[18] Kaupapa - principles

Chapter 2: Methodology

School as a Context

This project came about in a school context. The school is a state co-educational school of approximately 950 students with a very diverse school population. It is a decile five school with many students coming from both extreme ends of the socio-economic spectrum. Its cultural make-up is approximately 40% NZ European, 27% Pasifika, 26% Māori and 7% Asian and other.

I have worked in this school for a number of years and became heavily involved with the pastoral care of a year group as their dean. There was a group of students I expected to have struggled so much with school that I was surprised to see them still at school in Year 13 and having achieved at least a Level one NCEA qualification.

The position of dean involved ongoing interactions with the students and included substantial parental/whānau contact from the time of their enrolment in year 9 to the time of their leaving in Year 13. A dean is responsible for class placement of students, fielding parental concerns and questions, overseeing the follow-up of attendance and general school rules. Deans deal with behaviour situations, often refer students on to other services and frequently deal with other agencies that may be involved with a student. This role of pastoral care allowed me insight into students' lives on a more holistic level than that of the average classroom teacher. It is from this standpoint that I noticed these students as a group and reflected on my own expectations of them from an earlier stage. I had

to reflect on my low expectations for these students and consider why had I firstly labelled them "at risk" and secondly, what had made it possible for them to succeed at school.

An important aspect of the data collection for this study was that I knew all of these students well. I had had a working relationship with them for nearly five years and had witnessed some of their difficulties earlier in their schooling. It is probable that my knowing them for an extended period of time allowed them to speak more freely and our shared understanding of the context of school made sharing easier for them.

Selection of Participants (Characteristics)

This project involved the selection of ten students who fitted into the category of "at risk" at some stage in their schooling. "At risk" was defined as having had ongoing (over a period of years) learning, health, conduct or truancy problems. These problems were serious enough to have been regularly discussed by staff with deans and there had been substantial contact home about the issues. A number of these students had more than one of these issues. These students were still at school in Year 13 and had at least a qualification of level one NCEA. They were known to me as I had been their dean since the beginning of their time at secondary school. The other dean involved with this year group assembled a list of ten students with other possible participants, if there were any that did not want to be part of the study. He chose students based around the seriousness of difficulty they had and the notable success that they had had since their junior years at secondary school. This list contained a mixture of girls and boys and was

mixed in terms of culture, including students of Asian, Māori, Pākehā and Pasifika descent.

Recruitment

Ethical approval with sought from the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee and permission to conduct the research was sought from the Principal of the school, on behalf of the Board of Trustees. The other dean involved acted as a broker between students and myself, so as they did not feel pressured to be part of this study because of my position. These students were approached by my co-dean and asked if they would like to be part of this study. The Principal and my supervisor (Associate Professor Wendy Drewery) were named as people to field any concerns that parents or students may have (Appendix One).

Because students were between the ages of 16-18, they were able to consent to participation in this project without their parents' permission. However they received a covering letter and were encouraged to take this home to discuss with their parents and caregivers. On the consent form there was space for parents and caregivers to sign their consent too, if that was desired by the student (Appendix Two). In this participants consented to being interviewed for up to an hour and are invited to be part of a group discussion at a later date. Students were welcome to opt out of the study at any stage until the draft of findings was produced.

Participants in this study

The final group of participants included four female and six male students. Of this group one was Cambodian born, one Samoan born, four Pasifika New Zealand born students, two Māori and two Pākehā. This mixture reflects the cultural diversity of the school population and also of this group – students who have remained at school and gained qualifications while carrying the label "at risk" at some stage.

Ethical considerations

As I have worked with these students over the years as a dean and a teacher I have substantial background knowledge about them and much of that is confidential. This knowledge had been drawn at the very outset of this project and fed into the criteria for selection of students for the study. This knowledge was also part of what I brought to the act of witnessing these students' stories and my understanding of what they said.

Students needed assurance that this research was undertaken by me as a researcher, not a dean or teacher at the school they attended. The participants knew that under no circumstance did they have to take part in this study and that my professional relationship with them as teacher or dean would not be affected by their consent or decline to take part in this research. I was keenly aware of the power differential in my relationship with the students. Over this period I negotiated dual relationship positions, this was eased as I was not working in the school at the time. The involvement of my co-dean in recruiting, giving information and dealing with concerns was one way that this conflict of interest was dealt with.

The students' stories involved substantial personal information. Care has been taken to protect students' identities and their stories. All of the names (of participants and other people they mentioned) have been changed and aspects of stories have been fragmented so that participants' identities cannot be traced. They were assured that at any stage they could leave the study up until the point of seeing the draft findings. As some of these stories involved personal and sometimes emotional content, there may have been potential for distress for some participants. If this was to occur, I had enlisted the help of the other Year 13 dean and the Head of Guidance to refer these participants to. It was also made clear in consent that if any information was disclosed that raised concerns for an individual's safety that I was obliged to break confidentiality and also refer this to the Head of Guidance.

Data Gathering

A set of interview questions was constructed and used as a basis for all of the interviews (Appendix Three). Some interviews involved more questions to draw out further meaning and to get participants to expand further on their original answer. Participants were interviewed about what they perceived to have helped them reengage or stay at school. They were asked particularly about the impact their family and background had on their values of education and how they helped them stay at school. They were also asked about how staff (teachers and other staff eg. teacher aides, etc.), had supported them in staying at school. There was substantial discussion about student/staff relationships in these questions. They were also asked about how peer relationships at school helped them stay engaged, how these relationships were built and how school/class activities may have helped with these relationships. During this interview students were also

asked if they ever perceived themselves to be at risk and if they perceived themselves to be successful or not.

After these interviews took place, they were analysed for overarching themes. These themes were taken to be discussed with a small group from those interviewed. All participants were invited to be part of this discussion and it was attended on a voluntary basis. This group discussion was a means to clarify my understandings of overarching themes and any questions I may have had. It also involved students discussing how they found the method of this research and allowed them an opportunity to offer feedback.

Stories of success.

The interviews allowed students to speak freely to construct a "story" of the way they saw their success. I use the word "story" in relation to narrative and narrative theories of storying as shaping of lives (White & Epston, 1990). The concept of "storying" one's life is a powerful act that ascribes meaning to past experience and in doing so allows for future experiences to be accommodated in this story. These stories become shaping of people's views of themselves. Earlier their stories included failure, concern, not belonging at school. The stories I collected from them spoke of this and of change. It may be that this story of change had not been spoken aloud by many of the students before. The act of speaking into existence a "story of success" for these students was perhaps an act of finding new meanings in experiences for them. It may be that an alternative to what may have been a dominantly held view that they were "at risk" or "problematic" was opened in the process.

Agency can only be performed in relationship and my hope is that this process has allowed these young people to take up an alternative position, from that of "at risk" students who is subjected to what others think is best for them, to that of student who has been successful and their story needs to be heard. It is clear that in some of these students' stories there were people that inspired in them a sense of hope and a different way of thinking about themselves in school. As Weingarten (2010) states, "language of co-creation of hope as something we do together derives from a different way of thinking." This process may have opened a "conversational space for hope to arise" (p. 11). This position naturally brings up greater concerns about the colonising effect of labelling a student "at risk".

Witnessing stories

A crucial part of this process was the writing of a letter back to the participants. The interviews were transcribed and then summarised into letters written to each participant individually, summarising their story as I heard it. These letters were then passed back to each student for them to check for accuracy. They were given time to add, remove or alter information in these letters (See Appendix Four).

After sending these letters out to the participants, one of them approached me to talk to me about the letter he received. He said he sat down and read it with his friend and they cried together about the journey that was recounted in it. It was humbling to hear that the experience of his story being witnessed was such a powerful experience. As I had had an ongoing relationship with these students for many years before these interviews took place I added in the closing paragraph a personal comment that acknowledged what I had witnessed in their journey over

those years. During the group discussion the letters were discussed as being feedback that reflected what was said. Some found this to be like an act of giving yourself advice: “Yes. It was just like thinking back about how far you’ve come. It helps you a bit too – like using it or taking it as advice too. *Was it kind of a way of affirming yourself and knowing where you came from?* Yes.”

The other important aspect of the letters was that they allowed me to check my understanding of what I had heard and clarify that the summary reflected what was important to them. No participants asked for any changes to be made to these letters. This offered participants a level of transparency about what was going to be used in the reporting of this research: “It was helpful to see what you were actually using.”

Group discussion

A group discussion was conducted that included students who volunteered to be part of it. Of the ten participants three students attended. This discussion covered overarching themes that came out of the interviews. These themes came from the analysis of repeated ideas from the interview transcripts. In this discussion students reflected on the methodology of the project. This discussion was filmed and watched for consistency with messages from the interviews. Much of the information was a repetition of what students had said in the interviews but this process solidified and triangulated the data from the interview and my understanding of what was important information.

Analysis of data

Once this data was recorded, transcripts were made of the interviews and the group discussion. From each key points were taken from each participants' interviews. From this analysis some key headings were made and relevant parts of the transcripts were assigned to each. From this analysis of overarching understandings were formed. The feedback from the group discussion was used to guide the analysis also. When married with the literature around engagement and retention there were clear points that needed discussion.

Chapter 3: Findings

These findings describe the experiences and relationships of these young people that helped them to remain in school and achieve. They reflect the complexity of factors that impact on young people with risk factors in their lives. With this in mind, careful attention must be paid to the discussion around students "at risk" and to the experiences they have. These stories show the journey that these young people took through difficulties, from outside and in school. These journeys required the support of many people around them as well as the students' agency to make decisions in their own lives. They are journeys that speak of the tenacity of the students, their teachers and their families.

Within the findings are three cameo examples of the intricate lives that some of the students in this study brought with them to school. They have been chosen as they illustrate the variance of experience and the complexity of the lives that students may have. These students are those that could be in our worrying statistics but when we see them for the people they are, we see stories that involve risk but also much hope.

Overall these findings cover aspects from students' school lives and also aspects from outside of school that impact on their education. In their lives, whānau support and aspirations were very important as were expectations for these young people. The participants also had chances to make their own choices or were offered agentic positioning in their own lives.

At school, teachers and school systems allowed them to build social networks and strong relationships. The systems of community building at the school – both in and out of the classroom – offered students the opportunity to meet other students and form connections. Having a positive relationship with at least one teacher was discussed as very important and students described relationships that were built over years and showed an in depth knowledge of them from their teachers. These findings describe what factors they appreciated in successful, high quality relationships with their teachers.

All of the students interviewed had secure attachments in their peer group, had significantly strong relationships with at least one staff member or teacher and they enjoyed at least some of the learning and extra-curricular activities at school. All felt a sense of belonging at school and acknowledged a sense of community.

Adam's story

Adam came to school in Year 9 after having been to a number of primary schools previously. At one he was bullied and very unhappy. He finished his primary school years at another local state primary school. He loved it there and left at the end of year eight. While all of this was going on, Adam was diagnosed with a mental illness, aged eleven. He did not take medication for this.

When Adam began secondary school, he was put into a form class that seemed to be supportive and caring, however he didn't know anyone in the class. Adam describes this as the "worst time", a time when "I just got messed up and in a lot of trouble and that in a lot of classes. I didn't wag but I was getting referred."

It seemed that with times of stress and change Adam's illness was harder to manage and sometimes caused him to behave in a way that teachers construed as disruptive – talking a lot, making a lot of noise, finding it hard to settle. At this time a group of girls in the class felt that he was being naughty and would tell his teacher every time anything happened during the day. Adam felt a lot of resentment towards them for this. At one point this teacher pulled him aside and said that he would be sent to the activity centre (an alternative education facility) and Adam felt shocked and threatened by this. He knew students who had been sent there and didn't feel he needed such an extreme intervention. He said he left the room after this and "I never gave her [the teacher] a chance at all. Never have either. Because I felt bullied by her. That's what I felt like."

Adam says “I just found me a bunch of mates and stuck my head down and finished the year. He went on through Year 10 and seemed to settle more. In Year 11 he worked steadily well but became ill just before the end of the school year. He had made a goal earlier in the year to achieve 100 Level One credits. Few people thought that was a possibility for him anymore. However, Adam did achieve his goal, even though he could not attend school as usual.

In Year 12 and 13 Adam played in a number of sports teams representing the school and made a large group of friends over his years at college. He plans to do a plumbing apprenticeship when he leaves college.

Adam said that ‘I just say – what’s that quote – “you only get out what you put in” so I just keep thinking about stuff like that and it gets me through.’

Students’ Lives

Students’ backgrounds and values about education are shaped significantly by their families. The families of these students had impacts on the way students saw themselves and their potential. It appears that many of the families of these students entrusted the school to make their child more educated than they could themselves. On the other hand the school seems to expect families to deliver support to their children educationally, that they may not be equipped or aware of.

All of the participants brought high expectations from their parents and whānau, however sometimes the messages from home did not match those of the school. Parents’ and family’s messages and stories play a substantial part in the story that a student brings to school with them. Six of the students had stories of parents or themselves immigrating to fulfil family educational goals. Stories of family members’ disengagement or drop out of school also seemed to be discussed frequently. These stories were translated into very high expectations for many of the students.

Whānau/family support and aspirations

A number of students spoke extensively about how their families had played a big part in their desire to get an education. Many of them spoke of repeated messages about the importance of education in relation to their own family values – having a family of their own and being able to support them well, being the first in the family to finish school, finding independence. Many of the students – Māori, Pasifika and Pākehā – mentioned the support of other family/whānau members who actively supported them in their educational endeavours.

> I always just thought you had to come to school but my mum always said 'You only get one education so make it count so you don't struggle your whole life and to support your family.' She said if you have kids make sure you can provide for them. That's why they kept pushing us to stay in school.
>
> They guided me my whole life and they taught me well as I was growing up. They've always had that belief that if you do well at school then you'll do well in the real world.
>
> They taught me about being nice to people, being honest, do your work and try to manage your time quickly. And think about the future. Because my granny and grandpa are old and they won't be around, with me, forever. I've got to find my own future. One day I'll stand up for myself and have a good life, a good house, earn maybe just have a good life that I can enjoy. Cause they want me to be independent, to think for myself.

Some of the students' parents spoke to them about tangible goals such as qualifications and making it to the end of Year 13. This seemed to make their expectations for their children clear.

> They always tell me that school is the number one thing that you have to put first. They really want me to achieve and to pass everything and they want to see their son up there for graduation and want to know that I passed everything – well not everything but at least some things.
>
> They'll say that if you need an education and qualifications to get a good job and without that, if you have a family you can't provide for them. They always say study hard, go to all your classes and to get your credits and to always focus. Don't follow what your friends do, that's them,

> you're your own person, don't be a follower and just study hard is the main thing.
>
> My dad talks to me about coming to school and getting my qualifications. I always tell him I've already got my level two and he says just keep going to school and doing the work.

Many of the students discussed extended family and whānau as being important supports to their education. One student felt that he could be sure that his family would support him and that their physical proximity was important to him.

> I know that I have support wherever I go because my whole family – they all live close by – they'll always give me support, I'm sure.
> Other students acknowledged that aunties and uncles acted as role models for them and felt that they expressed high expectations for them.
>
> My aunties and uncles have all pushed us to get an education. My aunty went to university and used to be a teacher – she always told us to go to school and asked about what we're studying at school.

Grandparents were also discussed as having high expectations and goals for their grandchildren to do well at school. When asked who supported their learning, grandparents figured prominently.

> My grandma. She's always wanted us to do good at school. She wanted us all to go to uni. Like we don't have to but she thinks it would be nice for us too.
>
> Yes my granddad – he's English – he told me not to be at school to eat your lunch – he was probably one of the best that year – 'cause he's retired now – last month. Guess how old he was? 75.

Carrying the stories of others – migration and family history

Almost all of the participants' parents or extended families had not finished high school. This seemed to be influential in these young people's lives as many spoke of being the first person in their family to make it to the end of college. Along with this a number of them had family members who had been brought to Aotearoa from the Pacific for educational reasons; two participants had

been born in the Pacific and Asia. The weight of expectation on these students to do well at school was heavy, as they were often talked to about the sacrifices their families had made or their family's expectations for them to make the most of better educational opportunities.

> Yes – no one else in my family has [finished high school].
> It's a tough one. My parents both dropped out after year 12 and it's gone on from there really.

A number of students mentioned that their parents, when their families brought them out from the islands during their school years, had difficult stories about their own education.

> No. My Dad did schooling here and my mum did schooling in Samoa but they didn't finish. *So why did your dad come over?* His parents brought them here to come to school but then he was naughty. He kept on encouraging us because he didn't want us to be like him. *He wanted you to learn from his experience. I wonder if he felt he'd disappointed his parents?* Yes he used to always tell us that.

> It was her [mother], her older sister, and younger brother. She must have been two or three. My grandfather brought them over for a better life and better education.

Far from being disinterested in their young person's education, many of the participants' families were overwhelmingly focused on encouraging them to stay at school and succeed. The participants in many cases held the hopes of generations in their daily lives.

> *Were they [your family] educated in New Zealand?* No in Sa [Samoa]. *So they were educated over in Samoa, why did they come over here?* I think they wanted better education for me, a better life.

> Oh no – my Dad was born in Samoa and he was brought out here for education. Because back in his days it was hard for him. Just the fact that he was brought up over there and over here it was a whole different way of life. It was hard for him to get used to.

> But then he told his parents wanted him to leave school – some Samoan parents are like that – they want them to work to get the money.

Whānau support and stress

In a number of cases students spoke of parents supporting school expectations – attendance, uniform – sometimes against their own wishes. But in retrospect they acknowledge that this factor helped them stay out of trouble, or stay in school. Students were aware of the provisions that their families made financially and in terms of gear to help them succeed at school.

> Just encouraging me and whatever I need – like stationery and stuff – they always buy it and whenever I need school stuff – like school shoes and uniform. Yes so then I've got no excuse for getting in trouble.
>
> Yes and she'd always make sure that I had the correct books and stuff and right gear.
>
> She'd always make sure I had the right shoes – I'd say it's ok, just write me a note but then she'd say she'll do it for one day but I have to go with her after school and get some black shoes. She made sure I had the right uniform.

Parents' and caregivers' follow up of attendance and reinforcement of expectations of this were appreciated as important to keeping these students at school and stopping truancy becoming an ingrained habit. Some spoke of reprimands and others of more understanding approaches. Most acknowledged that their families and whānau were tenacious in their expectation for them to be at school learning. Those that struggled with truancy were given repeated messages and ongoing support to attend school.

> My family, talking to them about school. I know I haven't been going to [many] classes to be honest. So I talked to them about it and they've helped me through it. I'm going to classes and the teachers helping me and things. I've changed. I'm going to classes and I feel like I can do it now because of all the support I've got.
>
> Make sure we go to school – instead of being a pushover if we didn't want to go. She'd always be like – no no no –go to school.
> By encouraging me to go to class and actually go to school. Just to forget about the girls and put my mind on school and focus.

A number of students also mentioned that family had supported them by helping with homework, asking about school and talking about learning. Only a few students received help with their homework but many were asked and reminded about it regularly.

> Yes – they ask me if I've got homework each night. Real positive stuff. Yes, she normally helps me with my homework and trying to make me finish off all of my other work.

> If I don't know how it works or something – he'll show me how to do it, so I can then do it. Yes at home, with all my graphics work, Mum helps me at home when I've got to do all the writing.

One student mentioned that his parents found the work he does now at school "new" and did not feel confident in being able to help him with his homework.

> When I need help with homework – they'll try – but they don't know what it's about because it's quite new the work that we do. They try and support me. Yes – they're quite interested in what I learn.

Other students discussed how they should approach their school work with their parents and were offered advice and support.

> When I don't get the subject, I just don't do any more. But they've told me that I should ask – the teacher, not to be shy. Not to think I'm not as good as the other students that do get it. Just every day after school they ask do I have any work to finish, any assessments.

A number of students mentioned times when they and their parents felt they were failing in their education, this was usually a reaction to negative communication from the school. These were clearly times when this caused stress in both student and family life. When positive communication went home, this seemed to have major and different impacts on the young person, their parents and their view of how school was going for their child.

> I was actually a big disappointment to my parents and I'd got to the point where they were going to give up on me. It was also getting to the point

> where I wanted to leave home but I couldn't because I love my parents too much to ever do that.
>
> It has – the first time I started getting along with my mum when she said she was proud of me. She said it in class and I started crying. I was so touched because she's never said anything like that to me. I knew she does love me and care for me. A huge weight had been lifted and from then I started finding my love of PAR and if there's auditions for a little gig I'll go and audition now. Now Mum supports me 100% with school and my goals.

Students greatly appreciated the support of their families and spoke with a sense of pride and value in their school work when their families knew about what was going well at school for them. They acknowledged the patience and tenacity their families showed to help get them through difficult times at school.

Students' attributes

Almost without exception, participants talked about how at some point in their education they made a personal choice to stick with it. Although there were differing reasons for this choice most students felt there was a point where they began to take a level of responsibility for their education and made a choice to stay at school (and possibly about their future). This choice resulted in a change in the way students viewed school and themselves in school, how they conducted themselves and in most cases they needed to be determined in the face of expectations – which may have been lowered due to previous behaviour or performance. A few of the participants realised that they had come to a point where they had started to experience consequences in their education – they were substantially behind, could no longer get into courses they'd like to, or they were placed in a class that was for students at risk of failure.

> *Some students might have given up but you didn't. Do you know why that was?* Because I knew what I wanted to do after college. I knew what I had to do to get it. Yes because without it I wouldn't be able to do what I want to do.

Career choices

Some students spoke about when they decided on a career path, that they could focus more on school and achieved much more. This focus on the future and the benefits of education seemed to be a contributing factor to students staying at school.

> I still want to be an early childhood teacher – I'm going to stick with that. [I'm] not going to change.
>
> They [family] just told me to be yourself. One thing I noticed is that if they [friends] left school, I have the choice to stay or go with them. And I chose to stay because I've got something that I wanted to do and they've got something they wanted to do. *So have some of your friends left?* Yes – pretty much all of them. I don't want to follow them just 'cause I've got no friends here. They won't be with me for the rest of my life.
>
> Yes I have high expectations for performing arts particularly because I want to be an actor when I grow up. I've big values about that. I believe to achieve well in all classes. *Does that focus for your future help?* Yes, hugely I think.
>
> Education's important – for me to be able to achieve my goals – which is to become an actress, I need the qualifications to get into a good performing arts course. I need to come to school and get credits. *So your dream keeps you motivated?* Yes.

For some students education was also seen to provide for family in times of financial struggle. It appears in some cases there was hope that education would lift the young person from the impoverished situation in which their family found themselves. They clearly had the idea that a career could help them to transform their lives.

> I'm more focussed on money-wise because dad hasn't got a job at the moment and Mum's got a job but it's kind of hard at home. I did some research about plumbing ages ago – I thought they get a six figure salary and I thought you've got to take it.
>
> Yes – it's good. I'll get a job, get good money. I'll have a life.
> Yes. It can get you somewhere after school. Help you achieve your goals.
> When I was a little kid – I've always wanted to be a teacher. As I've

> grown up that changed to wanting to be a flight attendant but I've still got that thing about wanting to be a teacher. It's out of those two.

Consequences forcing choice

A number of students discussed how they had started to experience consequences at home and school for their behaviour. The pressure and negative input seemed to be a catalyst for change for some students. In saying that these students all felt they had some agency to change – that they could in fact improve the way teachers and parents viewed them in relation to their education. For some it was increasingly stressful relationships at home – due to problems at school – that made them realise that change needed to occur.

> I just got tired of being told off all the time, being in the office, being at home being ramped up. Always going home and having my parents yell at me. I wanted to prove myself to my parents and the teachers that were going to give up on me. I just thought put aside what they said and then I started proving myself and showing these guys what I'm capable of. 'Cause I didn't like who I was. I always felt grumpy and angry. I was always lazy and felt like I didn't want to do anything. Who'd want a life like that – always being angry, grumpy, getting into trouble. Looking around at some kids enjoying their time at school - laughing. And I wanted that feeling, I want to feel like I actually belong here. I want to have a laugh and have fun for once. I just got tired with all the issues I'd been through. Yes. I had it in me but I kept choosing the wrong choices. I always had a choice – I'd always choose the wrong one. Then I'd get in trouble for it and suffering.

For others it seems that they realised themselves that their previous approach to learning was yielding consequences that they were not happy with.

> Yes – I realised that my naughtiness brought me behind with my work. I never used to listen – I'd always say I don't want to do that, I didn't like people telling me what to do with my life and I was just like that's not me. I'm going to do what I like and just go and bum around and do whatever. Me and mum had arguments – I can see where she was coming from, she wanted the best for me.

Nelly's story

Nelly started college and was placed in a form class where she didn't have friends. She had come from a school that very few other students had come from and although she was a friendly and confident student, she found it hard to find friendships. She was bigger than many of the other students in Year 9, which she didn't really mind, but felt people were a bit scared of her or expected her to be physically aggressive.

She began to hang around with different people each week and ended up settling with a few girls from her form class that she felt were "trouble makers". She felt this because she knew they spread rumours. Nelly then became implicated in the spreading of these rumours. When this happened, it was expected that she would solve the conflict physically. When Nelly didn't, her friends thought she was weak. She said that "hanging out with the wrong crowd makes you change."

Nelly then noticed that she had begun to bully people too. After a while, one of the friends began to bully her, calling her names, telling her what to do, speaking badly of her to other people. Nelly said "At first I thought she was joking around and then? I stopped hanging out with them."

This was a huge decision for Nelly as she didn't have other friends. "I stayed by myself for a while – I'd go somewhere where no one really goes. I thought that's not me so I didn't change myself." After some time she met some older friends who knew her brother. "They accepted me and I didn't have to pretend with them. And I felt like I did have friends."

Nelly seemed to struggle in those junior years and Year 11 with her identity at school. She loved Performing Arts but when she spoke to a friend about being an actor they laughed at her. She felt she didn't have the potential to do what she wanted, nor the confidence.

In Year 12 Nelly was asked to participate in a class that focussed on her passion – singing and dance. This class has provided her with a close group of peers who share her passion and encourage her. She hopes to continue on a course in the Performing Arts area. She has achieved Level One and nearly Level Two – with Merits and Excellences in some assessments. When asked if she feels successful she said – "Yes I really do. Even telling about my junior years – I did it. Even when I was put down. I can't even believe I'm here. I thought I'd be repeating Year 12 or 11."

Peer Relationships

Peer relationships seemed to be an area which brought a lot of joy and fun to students' school lives but it was also an area that brought much stress and trauma when things were not going well. It seemed that peer relationships played

a huge part in how well students transitioned into the secondary setting. Some aspects of school life helped students make positive peer relationships well. In Nelly and Kim's stories, we see two students' stories of how bullying greatly impacted on their school lives. Finding friends who were supportive and accepting helped them move past this experience and these peer relationships helped for them to remain at school.

Community building – in peer relationships outside of class

Students talked about how they got to know each other through a number of different activities. Sport played a large part in many students' school lives. Most of the respondents seemed to find a place of value and belonging when they found a hobby or interest that they really enjoyed. They often met other students who became friends this way.

Sport was a way many of the students made friends and became something to do in break times. Often these teams became the people that they chose to spend time with and they began to spend lunchtimes in particular places where they would play together.

> I don't know – I didn't used to hang out with those guys at the start of 3rd and 4th form. I liked playing touch and I knew George from primary and Sam from playing rugby and Lani. And Tali and David from [Intermediate]. We all knew of each other. We started playing touch and started hanging out. Everyone plays sports, and we were in the same rugby team as well.
>
> *And at interval and lunch?* Yes we play on the courts. We've got a lot of time together and that's built the friendship really quickly.
>
> *So has playing rugby has brought lots of friendships?* Yes strong friends. Just playing sport – like all the rugby boys would hang around and play touch on the courts.

Many felt that recognition was given to them for their involvement in sports teams by other students and teachers. Some felt that it gave them a sense of place and pride in the school and their contribution.

> *What makes you feel valued aside from them?* Just football here. Everyone asks if I'm playing or when you're next going to play. It makes me feel good.
>
> In year 12 – it was my first year of rugby and I made the First XV. *And what was that like?* It was just incredible. *You didn't expect to get in?* No – I thought I had no chance. *So you got in. Do you think the sports been good for you?* Yes – it makes me have self pride. *When you come to school people are like "There's Ben, he's in the first 15"?* Yes. And I play basketball for the Senior A's as well. It's a pretty good year. *So do you think that the sport and playing for the school's given you more of a sense of identity?* Yes – It's given me a name throughout the school.

Some students felt that the sports team had set up enduring friendships that would continue on after the members had left school.

> Well I've found that last year I was quite sad when members of the team (the year 13s) left. I thought I might not play with them next year. But this year I think we'll all come back later to play for the club so that's really important. I want to stay close with the team – I don't want to just forget them.

Some students discussed other activities – particularly Music – that drew them together with friends. One student said his friendships at school were based around playing cards together. This element of play or shared activity seems to have brought a bond between him and his friends.

> With Jade – actually met him at Music. He started playing the guitar and singing and we introduced ourselves – I said hey my name's Ioane – and I sang along and we started jamming and I thought this guy looks cool.
>
> I guess I do something I love in school – for me it's barbershop and playing sport helps me academic wise cause I'm doing something else I love at school not just work.
>
> It started with us playing cards I think in year 10.

A place to be with friends seems to be important to young people. A physical space to feel safe and know who will be there seemed to feature as important in getting through the school day. In a number of students' school lives, the courts seemed to be a space where they play games together.

> [We're] just best mates now. Play on the courts and lunch and go out in the weekend.
>
> I usually see them on the courts. *At lunchtimes?* Yes and intervals and class as well. *What kinds of things do these friends provide you with at school? That help you here?* They let me play games with them on the courts. *So do you guys still play basketball and stuff?* Oh round the world and four square – it's really fun and funny.

Other students talked about how they had a space where they could participate in shared activities (cards, dancing, playing music) safely without other students interrupting them. One student talked about needing a place in lunchtimes to relax quietly, while another student mentioned a class set up for dance and music.

> We just stayed in G block all the time in the form class. *Why did you go up there? '*Cause no-one else went there, it was always quieter. *So was it important that no one else was up there?* Not really it's just that no-one was running round being stupid - like in all the other areas there's always people running around being stupid.
>
> *In lunchtime and that what do you guys do?* Sometimes we stay in class and blast the stereo and dance. Or grab a guitar and sing. Tell jokes. Sometimes the boys just go for a walk around the school or go to music.

The power to choose who you surround yourself with

Some participants mentioned that they made a conscious decision about who they surrounded themselves with at school. There were a number of reasons for this. One was because they needed more positive peer interactions to be happy at school. Another student was placed in a form class where he didn't know many students and he saw it as an opportunity to change his approach to his learning.

> "I guess like sitting with the right people and making new friends that keep you on track. I just thought to myself – I realised I'd been a bit naughty here and there but it was time to step up and get the work done I guess. I kind of saw others being distractive and that distracted me but I got over that. When I struggle about the work that was put up, I learned to ask questions and that really helped me achieve. Sitting with the right people because when you're struggling they help you out and they never distract you so that you can get on with your work and you can focus.

> "I changed my ways in Year 9. They were mocking people and bullying people. I started doing it too. After a while – this one girl backstabbed me – the other one would tell me what she was saying. I started to see it – she started bullying me. At first I thought she was joking around and I stopped hanging out with them.

Support of Peers

Participants also mentioned their peers offering support in good learning behaviours. Some mentioned that their peers would tell them to come to school or go to class. This kind of encouragement seemed to feed into peer group values of education. The speaking together about positive learning behaviours could be said to create a culture of learning and support amongst friends. Students also talked about friends being relied on to help with reminders, help and advice about how to approach learning well.

> Yes most of the boys go to class. They all say "just go to class". We always tell each other make sure you go to class. Just once in a while we don't.

> I guess Matt. He's a good buddy, and he's been a good buddy since 3rd form – the start. Whenever I'm down he'll talk to me and whenever I'm away from school he'll call me up and he'll tell me there's homework for health or something. That's good. *He watches out for you a lot?* Yes he tells me when work's due, on this day.

> *Have your friendships with these people helped you stay at school or learn?* Yes because they wanted to pass as well. We just helped each other out when we could.

On a larger level, participants spoke of how their friendship groups have supported them in staying at school. Many said knowing that friends were going to be at school made it much easier to stay. A number of students said simply if

their friends were no longer at school, they would leave, some indicated that this was the main factor in their decision to stay at secondary school.

> I didn't think I'd still be here at 7th form. But my friends have helped me stay in school. They've talked to me about education being important – and the things I want to do after school, I need what I'm doing here to help me achieve what I want to be. It made me realise how important education is to me.

There seemed to be frequent conversations amongst students about why remaining at school was a positive decision and also discussion about how the decision to leave early for some other students was not what was best for them.

> My brother - he had a good group of friends all through school but once he got to seventh form lots didn't come or only once a week. And it's hard by yourself – you need people to talk to. Yes – it's just 'cause everyone's still here. I reckon if more people had dropped out. Some people have left but someone might say I'm going to drop out and get a job but most of the boys will try and keep them in school. Like I was meant to drop out at the start of this year and all the boys text in the holidays, rung up, came over. It makes you come to school.

> Yes – and just seeing all the boys at school. And not wanting to be a bum outside of school when everyone else is at school. I don't know. I just like hanging round with the boys and when Tom left. And I don't think he's got any qualifications and we're all like – far what's he going to do, he's going to have nothing and we're all like 'stuff that being a bum'. And it's just made us all stay in school.

Peer relationships seemed to provide an anchor for students when things were difficult in their home or school life. These friends listened to the problems occurring and offered support and advice.

> They basically have just been supportive, being good friends. Whenever I went through stuff they tell me to come to school and talk about it. …When I do – I always go to the boys and ask them what I should do. I'd go up to them and say I'm not coming to school. They'd be like why? And I'll be like I can't take this crap anymore. Class is too much. I'm always getting told off. They'll be like just come to school and be with us with your head held high. You don't need to do anything you don't want to do. Just come in and be yourself. And it keeps me [here].

> When I have issues at home he talks to me about it and I talk to him about it and he gives me advice. We hang out a lot in the weekend.

Overall students felt their peer relationships had a large impact on how valued and comfortable they felt at school. These bonds seemed to deepen with time and shared experience.

> Everyone likes the same stuff – bring up a topic and everyone will talk about it. Even the choir guys, you bring up rugby and everyone will talk lots about it. *So you've got lots of common interests?* Yes. It was good – all local – so everyone knows each other in Porirua. Sometimes they did barbershop and stuff.
>
> Yes we've been together for the whole school years. So we're family. *Do you think that that family feel is important too?* Yes definitely. Especially in a class. Everyone can be normal – be themselves. They don't have to worry about what other people think and feel insecure about anything. We're really close and relaxed. Having that feeling is real good especially in class.
>
> *What is it about coming to be with your friends that's important?* I don't know – so I don't get bored at home. *Do you feel valued?* Yes I feel free. I feel like I belong with them. We've already gone this far and I didn't want to leave. *What makes it so good?* Just the way they treat me. We always treated each other like brothers and sisters.

Some students mentioned the greetings and handshakes were important to knowing you are valued by others. One student mentioned that the way young men greeted each other with a handshake was an important part of the wider community culture and was part of being from Porirua.

> Just like as soon as lunch starts, I walk out onto the courts and people offer to give you a handshake and it makes you feel valued and a sense of belonging and stuff like that. *So the physical thing, do you think that's really important?* Mmm. Makes you feel valued as well. *Anything else that makes you feel valued?* Just mates. Mates is the biggest one.
> No not really. Everyone in our year group just got along with each other. The boys they used to hang out with each other. We still see each other and shake hands and say we'll meet up in the weekend. *Is that handshake important?* Yes – shows you're mates, says hi. It's a thing in Porirua – even with guys from [other schools]. Even if you don't say anything the handshake means 'how are you?'

Kim's story

Kim came to college from a residential special needs school. She had stayed there for two years before enrolling and beginning to attend this state, mainstream secondary school. She described her previous school as "a special school that you go to when you need help and stuff, like me. And so it helped with my school work and life." She said at first it was very hard at this school but things got easier once she got to know the people and staff a lot better. The school operated substantially differently from an average state school with much higher staff-student ratios and many trips and camps. Kim mainly came back in the holidays to her family.

Kim's family are her adopted family. They had originally been her foster carers years earlier as she and her brother had been removed from their birth parents. The parents she lives with have already raised a family and took both Kim and her brother in. They have been very patient with Kim and the school in finding a positive way forward for her in her education.

When Kim first started secondary school, there were clearly going to be difficulties in transitioning to a mainstream school environment. Kim felt very shy in her first years at secondary school – "I didn't really want to start a new college. I didn't really want to start here. I was too shy at first." She was placed in a class of students with high learning needs, fewer students and an associated teacher aide. This class was very difficult, at times, for the teacher to cope with and Kim often felt there wasn't much time for her and she was sometimes treated very cruelly by some of the other students in the class.

At this time, Kim had very few friends at school. The teacher aide in the class – who was with them for much of the day – became a person that Kim relied on to help her with her work (when often the teacher couldn't get to her) and as a person she could talk to when she was being bullied or felt unhappy. This relationship has stayed with Kim. Although the teacher aide has moved on to another position in the school, Kim still drops in and sees her to catch up with her.

In Year 11 Kim struggled to achieve Level One and in some ways must have found the expectations of maturity difficult to meet. At this time she became involved in netball, playing for the school. This had been something she'd wanted to be part of since Year 9 but had not felt confident enough to sign up. Kim has continued playing ever since and this brings her a lot of joy. She has also been involved with Stage Challenge which she loved because she has a passion for dancing.

In Year 12, Kim had been taking Hospitality as a subject as school and she was asked if she would like to do a part-time job for the department, preparing supplies, etc. This opportunity has given Kim confidence and she's paid, which she acknowledges is a boost.

Since that time, Kim has achieved level one and is involved in the Gateway placement programme. She hopes to go on to a course at the local polytechnic next year. Kim has a place to be at interval and lunchtimes. She plays out on the courts with many of the students from the year group, where she is accepted. She feels that she has a lot of friends and appreciates their kindness. She says she now enjoys meeting new people. In her words, "everything's exciting".

Teachers' Influence

Teachers' classroom practices had a large impact on the development of successful peer relationships and finding a "place" when starting at secondary school. The classroom community was a place where students felt they built connections, met people different from themselves and learned pro-social habits.

Community building – with peers inside the classroom

The classroom was a key place where students got to know one another and established strong connections with their peers. Teachers who managed to build a sense of acceptance and community in their classroom, allowed their students to feel a much stronger sense of belonging and care for one another.

The form class.

An important way students met peers and developed relationships was through what they did in class. In this school students stayed together in form classes for core subjects– Maths, English, Science, Social Studies and Physical Education – in Years 9 and 10. After this, in the senior years of secondary school, students move out to their own elective subjects but still meet in the form class during form time once a day. Many built strong bonds with their classmates through this time. These form classes seemed to act as a transition group for many

of the students and those who settled well into their form class, seemed to feel they made better relationships with their peers.

> I used to be friends with Eva, Hana, Brenda. Pretty much the whole year 9 form class. Since year 9 – Brenda was my first best friend that I'd made. We both were quiet, and later on we just started telling stories to/about each other. We didn't know we were best friends but later on some people said hey you guys are best friends and we were like "ah we are". *And how did you meet the others – Eva and Hana, etc.?* They were in my form class in year 9. *And how did your form class get to know each other so well?* Eva was being stupid and we enjoyed having her in our form class. *Did she draw you together?* Yes we all sat in a group.
>
> My form class because we were together for ages. Then hanging around with our form classes' friends. Just everyone just welcomes each other. … It was cool as – we just all got along together. We had heaps of leaders in there too.
>
> *How did you meet them?* Form class – my form class. *Has your form class been important to you?* Yes. When I'm in there with everyone I feel like completed. Like ever since I started here – since Year 9 – like my family. I think what brought us really close – how we'd be in the same class when we were juniors every single day. Then when we got to Year 11 we were split and that was weird then we all got used to it.

Subject classes

Particular classes were mentioned as places where students could become friends easily with each other. A number of students said that option classes (electives) with a practical element helped their friendships. Sometimes in these classes the students developed a culture of helping one another and this seemed to help peer relationships develop well.

> Yes in fourth form our option classes – all of our boys would walk around together. People would be like these boys want to be a gang but we were just walking to the same class. It was fun – just all of us boys – and the classes were mostly boys too – we were all in woodwork or metalwork together. Do our work together, everyone helping finish their work.
>
> *Were there any classes where you've developed good relationships with people your own age?* Probably engineering through helping other people when they didn't know how to do things. *So you'd say that you've got some skills that other people might not necessarily have?* Yes.

Another student mentioned that these classes brought him together with students who were very different from himself. He felt that the class – Drama – had allowed him to work with other students and learn to respect them in a way he had not before.

> Mitch in Drama for example. Because Mitch's so brainy I'm never in any of his classes but we did drama together last year and this year. But it's been real cool hanging with him. He's a really good actor as well. I've got a lot of respect for him.

Class activities were mentioned as a means to work with others and get to know them better. Talking in class was mentioned as a way of learning and building positive relationships with peers (and teachers for that matter). Talk about other things (other than just the work taking place) was greatly valued by the students as a means of getting to know one another.

> Yes. I just like working in a group. *Why's that?* Communicating with others and working as a team. *Has that helped improve your language?* Yes through the talking.

> Were you allowed to talk to each other in the class? Yes. Was it encouraged? Yes. To talk about the work? Yes and other stuff too. What kind of work were you doing? Oh work in groups and practical.

Working in groups and on practical tasks often facilitated the formation of easy relationships. Students enjoyed these activities and the aspect of fun they brought to the classroom.

> You know how it's half theory half practical – I haven't failed a test at all. And doing practical during the week just tops it off. *The practical helps you connect?* Yes – just have fun.

Some students talked about how these conversations and group experiences helped them understand others better, making them able to accept difference more. Students helped each other with their work and were valued for the skill they brought with them.

> Yes – like group activities, devised [Drama] work. We had to get in groups of four so you get to know your group. *Do you find classes where you do group activities you get to know other people better?* Yes – I like that idea.
>
> *So you share your skills – do you like helping other people?* Yes depending what it is. Last year if some of us didn't get something and the teacher was busy, we'd just help each other out.

Reciprocity seemed to be part of these relationships too. One student discussed the shared values and ways that they came together as a class to build a "family-like" atmosphere.

> *How did the family bond build?* I think the values – honesty, respect, commitment. Those values have helped. At first we were always in our little groups. Miss tried to get us together. Then she got us to write values and choose the main ones that we wanted. She helped us build a family bond. From there we knew we all went through similar things in life – not to judge each other. We all came together and started trusting and respecting each other. Respect goes both ways.

Community building – through Restorative Practices

Class meetings are a form of restorative practice that has been used at the school over the last three years. These meetings are held with the whole class and their teacher (often with other teachers, form teacher, deans, etc. present too) when something is not going well in the classroom. The meetings invite all present to look at what might be happening in a class, how this affects all involved, what strengths can the people draw on to improve it and what individually each community member can do to improve the situation in the future. Each of these points is a round when all members of the class community speak about what they think. Although some students found speaking aloud to the class difficult and others did not like the time taken out of class work, most feedback from students believed they helped bridge differences in the class between students and their teachers. Students mentioned that they appreciated this forum to come to understand their teachers' point of view more.

> The teacher got to speak about what they don't appreciate in class and sometimes the teacher doesn't want the class to be a whole class discussion – they want some work done too.
>
> *Did you think they were worthwhile?* Yes definitely. When you've got a teacher crying to their class. Miss W for example in Science, we had a meeting at the start of this year actually just about the talking and that. She broke down into tears and everyone thought alright she's actually serious. That's when people realised that she wasn't joking about stuff.

Other students mentioned that it was a way to bridge the power imbalances that are in classrooms, particularly between more dominating and quieter students. They felt that the process drew the students together as equals.

> And the quiet students can talk about how they felt too – they don't speak their mind when it's your class and teacher there – they get a chance when everyone's listening. It's like team bonding – you have to work as a team. *It brings the class together?* Yes – and we all understand. And it helps us understand about each other's goals.
>
> Yes getting to hear what other people felt about the class and everything going on.
>
> *Do you think it improved things?* Yes I think so because it brought everyone together and we were talking. The class meeting gave them a chance to speak their mind and give their side of the story. What they want to change. "Yes it was pretty interesting because old Mr V and Ms G. It was pretty funny to hear people's stories in there. *What kinds of things?* What was going wrong. What could be better. *What was interesting?* Everyone said we're not playing enough sport. Yes we all had a voice.

Some students felt that there were perceivable changes in the way the class managed as a community after the meeting had taken place.

> *Did things change?* It changed a little bit. Most of the class passed a test and that was straight after that.
>
> At first I thought it was annoying but then when we started doing it constantly, it was actually kind of helping. Just hearing what everyone's got to say and how we all had to say something each. It made me think. *Did you find the speaking easy?* Not at first but I did afterwards.
>
> Do you think they helped to make things better? Yes – how respectful you've got to be to each other. Like more aware of each other? Yes. Are you more aware of other people now? Yes.

Teacher student relationships

The students recognised that teachers are crucial to their success in school. A number of factors and behaviours in the way teachers related to students made impacts on these young people. There were certain teacher behaviours that students felt allowed high quality relationships to develop with their teachers. These behaviours made students feel valued, supported and cared for at school.

Human to human

Personal connections with teachers were an important point of contact for students to build relationships with school. Without fail, participants appreciated being able to talk to or know their teachers as "people" not just their subject teacher. This personal connection seemed to bridge differences between students and their teachers and even though the relationship was seemingly quite superficial, students clearly felt happier knowing that an adult in the school "knew" them. Some students mentioned this as an important aspect in their transition to college. As one students said – "some of the teachers were rather scary" and to see a familiar face on staff helped them feel more comfortable in what could be a very difficult time of transition for them.

> Yes probably Mr H because he used to work at my primary school with woodwork as well so I already knew him before I came here. *Was that nice for you when you came here?* Yes because it was someone who I actually knew round school.

> I really like the PE teachers. Mr P was my PE teacher since year 10. He used to live in my grandparents' house. We had a catch up about it. Whenever I see him he smiles at me. Yes – he'd always ask me – have you got a game this week?

Students also talked about how teachers spoke to them. These interactions included subjects that fall outside of the learning within the classroom. At times

these discussions and connections were very small but clearly appreciated by the young people all the same.

> Some teachers you can have good conversations with – the news – they have the same interests – about rugby or what's happening in the world. Everyone will have a conversation then get back onto your work. They're understanding and they want to come down to your level. They don't want to stand over you or yell at you. They'll just help you out.
>
> Last year with Mr P I thought we had a good connection. Every time I'd come to class, we'd just have that little friendship kind of thing. Just by socialising and communicating with that teacher.

Shared interest with teachers and the class was important to the work and relationships built within the classroom.

> Everyone in our class plays sport – and he's a sports fanatic. Everyone loves it.

In learning interactions there seemed to be a balance needed between expecting work to be done but also showing a willingness to "know" or understand the students.

> What kinds of things do positive relationships between students and teachers have? Being supportive, talking, encouraging.
>
> Yes showing care and he'd always ask about what I was thinking about doing in the future- what do I want to do.
> *When they speak to you , how do they do it? How is it positive?* Sometimes they'll talk to me like my teacher and other times they'll come down to my level and I can open up.
>
> The teachers are strict, they'll treat you as a friend as well – they know you're only young and want to joke around. They won't be too serious. Not really a friend – they understand. They're not straight lose it and kick you out.
>
> I'd say Ms T. She wants the best for us and wants us to achieve our goals in life. There's a thing about her – she's like another mother in school. I didn't get to know her till last year and just from then – the first time she talked to me – asking how I am. She's like a really cool teacher and that she can help me out this year. And I don't get along with a lot of teachers.

Approachability seemed to be really important to a number of students. The possibility for students to be able to ask a teacher for help or to speak to them about personal issues seems to be greatly appreciated by them.

> Yes I'd say that Ms L is the only teacher I've ever opened up to. I can't really tell other teachers about my personal life. She gives me support and when I go to her with problems – I feel like I'm her daughter. She's even said that – with us in our class we're sort of like a family – and we see her as our mother.
>
> I feel like I can talk to him about anything. He's understanding – I'm not saying that the other teachers aren't. He's nice, he's a good man. He knows when I'm going through something, just by my body language and then he'll ask me if I need help with anything.
>
> I don't know – she was really good. A nice person to talk to. Like I could talk to her if someone was being mean to me or something or if I got bullied or family stuff.
>
> It's good to know that they're there for you. Some teachers walk past you and notice that you're down and that but they just walk past and leave you there. But if something's up it's good for our teachers to check on us rather than just leaving us to cry or bottle everything up.

Participants also mentioned that they felt they could learn from teachers' wisdom, advice and stories of their own experiences. A number of students mentioned that they admired their teachers and looked up to them.

> Ms was just there comforting us and giving us advice and wisdom. Telling us that we shouldn't let our personal lives affect us at school. Just leave it at home and prove your family wrong that you're not that failure.
>
> I admire Mr P – for what he's been through. It doesn't happen to many people and he's still been there for the school – which is really good. I see him as a good bloke.
>
> If she's here and lived her dream. If she can do it, I can too.

Values of relating

There seemed to be certain values that teachers brought with them that were evident to students in the way they taught and interacted with their students.

There seemed to be an appreciation for the respect that was given and received between staff and students.

Respect

Students seem to be aware of the reciprocal nature of respect in the teaching and learning context. They discussed teachers who respected them and how teachers were respected. One student spoke of how the class had decided that the teacher would be respected by students and monitored each other's treatment of the teacher.

> Maybe to be fair. You give respect and you receive. It's the teacher offers heaps of advice on what we're doing. We'd give the teacher respect when we don't talk when he or she's talking. 'Cause teachers are usually fair.
>
> Yeah maybe it comes back to that thing of respect. If you're quiet and listening and you still need help, he's more likely to want to help you than the people who are talking and then they're like Mr can you help me.
>
> Everyone just respected him hard out, like no one gets smart. When other students got smart to him, our class will growl them off. As soon as he wanted to talk to us – he'd say take a seat and straight away everyone just sits down and there'll always be one person still talking and we'd all tell them to shoosh.

Equity

Many students felt that good teachers treated others as they'd hope to be treated themselves and equality was evident in their treatment of their students.

> I didn't want to be treated differently. I didn't want to look like I needed help.
>
> Yes he cares about everyone and gives everyone a fair chance. If they're naughty in class he'll tell them and if they carry on he'll do something else – a real positive teacher.
>
> If you respect them and they respect you as well and they can help you out. *What do you mean by respect?* They treat you the way they want to be treated and they treat everyone as equal.

Not giving up and second chances

Many also mentioned the importance of their teachers never giving up on them and being willing to offer them second chances, even when they may have squandered an earlier chance.

> Mr R – even though I was horrible at maths – he still believed in me – that was the main thing.

> The teachers really helped me out – even though I was a little shit in their class. *How did they help?* They'd help me with my work even though I was loud or got smart. They wouldn't take it personally. Just trying to be funny. They still helped.

> Level one and level three Mr L has been a good teacher. He always gives me a chance – even when I'm not doing too well. I think he's just good to anyone he teaches really.

> If you need help then ask. I know when I was growing up, I always needed help because I'd never listen and when I do ask, the teacher helps you and they feel good about helping you. You feel good 'cause you get the work done.

In some cases students mentioned that teachers gave them messages that they had given up on them. They felt that the teachers no longer wanted them at school and felt substantial hurt at having been perceived as wasting time and teacher attention.

> Like some teachers would come up to me and confront me. They would come up and say "if you're just going to do this, why are you here?" and "what's the point?" To be honest it hurt being spoken to by a teacher like that. But I realise that it's kind of good for them to say it to me because it made me realise what was going wrong. Some teachers might say it because they don't like you but others might say it as a kind of support. You know you do belong here and you do have a lot to offer in this world you know.

Going the extra mile

Some students noticed that some teachers gave up their own time to give them extra help and make sure that they completed work to the best of their ability.

> In year eleven we were given a teacher aide – Ms Hunter – to help us out. Ms O. – she'd always push us to go to the study centre and in the holidays she'd say we can come in and get one on one help with the work *So there were offers of support?* Yes basically our whole class, going the extra mile.
>
> Sometimes they'd sit down with you and organise lunchtimes with you – extra time. Give you extra time for work and resits.

Knowing Us

Acknowledgement by teachers came through as very important to young people. Students associated acknowledgement with being valued by their teachers, for both what had been done well but also what they could potentially do. Acknowledgement of students on a regular basis – greeting them, checking in with them, noticing their absence or changes in their demeanour – seemed to be very important to the students too. Some mentioned when this seemed to be missing from their relationships with teachers and it seems to be construed as a lack of care for them from the teacher.

Students mentioned the importance of teacher acknowledgement of their potential and talent. This contributed greatly to students' feeling of value and participation in school life.

> I also kept getting reminded about my talent by some teachers. These guys are right you know – and here I am wasting it – not coming to class or school. I really wanted to make a change out of myself – I wanted to be a better person.
>
> Well I was going to give up – in fifth form I was planning on not coming back to school and then Ms M had so much hope for me and knew I could do way more. She just didn't give up on me and I really want to thank her for that, for the support that she's given me.
>
> I think he's just liked me since year 9 – always seen talent in me. Even when I wasn't playing rugby he'd ask me every day – when are you going to play rugby?

You think there was something in the class that made that leadership come out in people? Yes Mr R was a good teacher, he'd always mention that we were all leaders and he'd always tell us to look after the little ones.

Some mentioned that acknowledgement of what they did positively made them feel valued and helped them change behaviour when they were getting told off.

Is it important for a teacher to respect you? Yes. *How do they show that?* Probably by acknowledging the good you do for the class or the school. *So you'd say it was a good quality relationship?* Yes. He'd always tell me after class that I'm the top student. *So he'd give you positive feedback?* Yes. He speaks his mind. He's straight up - in a positive way not a negative way.

What's helped you succeed? Just when I get in trouble, teachers telling me I can do good. Like every time they growl me off at the same time they say I'm a good student at the same time.

Tenacious relationships

Many students found a continued connection with teachers or staff at the school very important. This continuity made them feel more understood. There seemed to be a level of tenacity that students appreciated also with teachers or staff that stuck with them. They mentioned feeling that their teachers "knew" or understood them as people, not just students.

"So when you know them – you feel you can ask and get what you need. Yes. What makes you know them? Just through being in their classes for a couple of years. So you feel like you know them as people or just as teachers? I just know them more that I knew them in Year 9 or 10. How long have you been involved with [these teachers]? All along. Is that important? Yes it is to me.

There was some acknowledgment that these teachers had been with them to see them grow up or seen them through hard times.

Have these teachers been with you through the whole time? Was that important? Yes that's important so that they know what I've been through. *So they know you?* Yes so they [the teachers] know how I am. *But that long period of time?* Yes that's important because they see you grow up.

> Yes Ms M – she's been really supportive of me since she took me in last year. No matter what we've all been through with her she's always been there for me.

There was also some mention of teachers knowing their family or siblings, to gain a greater understanding of them.

> Now you've had her quite often haven't you? Yip and she knows my brother. So she actually knows your family too? Oh no just one of my family. And when did she teach you? Year 11, 12 maybe.
>
> How's she become a big part of your life? Well I kind of met her through my older brother Junior and she sees us as her own sons – and it's good to know that you're a part of someone and they're a part of you too. And seeing her support has been really touching for me. And has she taught you often? Since third form. Has that consistency been important? Yes.

Showing care

Participants also discussed how teachers talked to them to motivate them in the classroom and to enforce expectations. Students appreciated staff talked to them about what they were doing and continued to revisit them and their progress. There seemed to be a delicate balance of continuous encouragement, reminders and sticking with students through difficulties.

Students felt that maintaining high expectations for learning with consistent reminders and encouragement was a clear way for a teacher to show care. This also allowed the young people agency to decide but communicated the value the teacher placed on the learning and the student as a learner.

> *I've heard you talk a lot about talk – do you mean they talk to you as a person?* Yes they treat you like an actual – like adults talk. Not forcing you to do stuff – but if you're going to talk make sure that you're doing your work as well.

One student noted how it was important that this was done in a calm and respectful manner. Preferring to be reminded rather than reprimanded and certainly not treated aggressively for being off task.

> Yes – if you treat them how you'd like to be treated. Most teachers are kind – they give you the work and say make sure you do it. They'll walk around and not stand over you but if you're off task they remind you. Not too strict – in your ear every five seconds. *So you wouldn't like any aggression?* No – not yelling at you. I'd just sit there and piss them off. Most teachers let you have a little conversation.

Students also discussed how a number of teachers approached helping them, even when they did not ask for help themselves. They acknowledged staff who had the awareness to notice when things were difficult or knew them well enough to approach them before they needed to ask for help. They also noticed these staff would continue this and kept asking and giving help.

> I feel like some of the teachers when they talk to me and help me and that was it. What I noticed when [others] were teaching me was that [they] could see that I was struggling. And could see that I needed help and kept asking and I kept saying no but knew that I did.

> She'd always help me out when I was stuck on something. If I didn't know how to do it, she'd show me how to do it.

> Ms L for engineering. With the writing – we had assignments that had a lot of writing and she'd help me out with that if I couldn't work out what the question was asking and she'd explain it in more detail. When we needed to finish some of our assignments and we were running out of time, she'd come in at lunchtime and let us come in when we were on our study break.

Teacher expectations

Teacher expectations were important to students. They expressed a desire to do well at school and wanted teachers to express this too. They wanted acknowledgement when they did things right but also wanted teachers to speak to them when they need to change what's happening in the class. There were a number of ways teachers expressed high expectations for their students.

High expectations about classroom behaviour and work were important to the students. They felt that if they were not getting what they needed done, they needed to trust that their teacher would check up on them, help them if they needed it and make sure it got done. This still preserved students' sense of agency and responsibility for getting their own work done, while being actively supportive and respectful of students' potential.

> Yes. I don't want the teacher to say you can do the work if you want to, I want them to say 'make sure you get it done.' They can give the work, explain it and I can just do it but talk as well. But make sure you get the work done.

They wanted their teachers to be assertive in what they wanted from their classes and the work. This is a key aspect of managing a classroom but students appreciated this on an individual level too.

> I guess just the realness in the way he talks. He's not all talk. Speaks his mind. He's straight up. In a positive way not a negative way. He's not a quiet man – he doesn't just set the work then sit down. He socialises with us and jokes around. I like that side of him. But he's also serious. So he's not this teacher who's really passive and let's everything happen. He's also assertive and speaks his mind.
>
> He was just real kind and honest. Always honest about our class. *Like what?* Like if our class was doing bad, he'd tell us straight up and if someone was talking too much, he'd just tell them straight up and he'd always show us opportunities of what to do in the future.

Follow up of behaviour, attendance and work completion seemed to be appreciated, particularly in retrospect. This follow up was construed by students as being a show of care and expectation for that student. If done with care, students accepted teachers' follow up and thought they couldn't "get away with it" again. There seems to be an eagerness to be held to account by these young people and a need to know that when they erred from expectation that it was noticed.

> The deans are ok – at keeping us in school. They weren't too slack or too strict. If we missed a few periods they would check up on us and we'd realise that we can't get away with wagging that period anymore. Some teachers – you see them around and they say make sure you come to my class next.

Punishment was mentioned but more importantly was the discussion about what had happened so that student could learn from the mistake.

> [They] never gave up on me. Especially with like my uniform, [they] always tried to keep me on track with it and always telling me to bring the correct gears and uniform. *You've mentioned encouragement and things like that – any other ways?* Like telling us off – so that we learn and know not to do it again *And when you get told off is it in a way that you can understand?* Yes – not told off more like getting punished – like good punished *Like making it right?* Yes. *Do you learn from that?* Yes.

Students acknowledged that even when they were caught out, that they still may not do what is expected of them. They appreciated that some staff "made sure" that things were set right.

> Ms E – she used to always growl us off and tell us boys to go to class. And she just won't let us go, she'll walk us to class. That means we'd have to go. *And that helped?* Yes – because sometimes I didn't want to go to class because I didn't' know what to say if I'd wagged the class before but if a teacher walked me in it'd be alright.
>
> Just when we have practices she'll ask the teacher – that we have assessments – if we miss out on anything, she'll watch us do it in her room and make sure we get it done.

Some students discussed how important it was for them to have a staff member to approach about their academic performance. This is particularly important in the senior school when credit counting can become an important part of making sure students achieve, particularly students that may struggle to achieve.

> Yes – how I'd always come to you to get my results? I'd notice if I needed to get a bit more credits – I'd always check how many credits were yet to come and I'd add them up and try my best so that I'd pass them *So it's important for you academically for you to have someone you could come and see and check where am I at?* Yes that's the most important thing.

> Like level 1 I had just over half the credits I needed. All the credits were there – I just needed to get the work done. So I just jotted it down. I was determined to get it done.

Perhaps it is important to ensure that students all get a good understanding of this. We assume they know, but this suggests not necessarily.

"At Risk" Labelling

A number of students spoke about how they were treated or expectations of them that came from teachers' labelling or totalising them as a student "at risk". Most students had an awareness of their teachers being concerned for them, some to a point where exclusionary practices had started. These practices included: in the junior school, threats of being sent to alternative education and in the senior school, pressure to leave.

> *Did you ever perceive yourself to be "at risk"?* Yes in Year 9. Ms pulled me over and said if you don't stop mucking around I'm going to send you to activity [alternative education]. *You didn't want that?* No *It was a threat?* Yes a little one. *To be pulled out of mainstream education is a big deal. Were you quite shocked at that?* Yes I was but I knew I was better than that – I know the people that go down there. *What did it feel like to be associated with that?* I left the room. *Were you offended?* Yes.
>
> *What made you think that?* They were worried about me, that I wouldn't have a good life or future if I couldn't talk to people – of different cultures *Your family or the teachers?* The teachers, my family don't really care that much. 'Cause they want be to be independent, to think for myself and if I can't work it out I can just ask them why *How did that make you feel?* Um – pretty stuffed up. I didn't like it but later on I got used to it and I understood why.

Few felt pleased with this categorisation and some felt it was contrary to the messages they were receiving at home – that they were thought to be incapable at school, while their families felt otherwise. One student said his mother would come in for meetings where he was encouraged to leave. His father agreed with the school but his mother insisted on him staying. This shows the

impact that schools' communication with home can have and the care with which suggestions of leaving should be handled.

> Yes she'd always come to the meetings with the teachers and stuff. Sometimes my dad would be like take him out of school, he's just wasting people's time and money. But my mum was like – I think because she came from Samoa and she's always pushing us to get a good job. Even though she was angry at me I still knew she wanted me to stay in school, finish off my work. Make sure we go to school – instead of being a pushover if we didn't want to go. She'd always be like – no no no –go to school.

Another student mentioned that the reports that went home from school made her a failure in her own and her mother's eyes.

> *I've heard you mention that word a few times – failure. Is that how you've perceived yourself at school?* Yes. I used to wag a lot and I didn't really do anything in class and ignore them. When I get reports and phone calls that said I wasn't coming to school or playing up in classes or not doing my work, I guess that's where it started and then my mum says ' this is not who I raised' and this isn't the person I see in front of me. Calling me a failure and look at your siblings, they graduated high school with high standards and why can't you be like that. There's something that made me just want to give up. Then she'd threaten me to make me do better in school but it didn't work. I got a really bad report and she wouldn't speak to me. She said she didn't know why I was going to school at all and I said I was trying my best and she said that my best wasn't good enough.

Some participants felt that with this concern came supports (teacher aide and one-on-one help specifically).

> *Did you ever think the teachers thought you were at risk?* Yes sometimes. I was bad in English – I just don't like it, never really liked it. In year 11 we were given a teacher aide to help us out. Our teacher – she'd always push us to go to the study centre and in the holidays she'd say we can come in and get one on one help with the work.

However, many felt this labelling brought with it a lot of problems – poor reports, frustration, family conflict and a sense of being given up on or giving up.

Most of the students wanted to be treated with respect and a sense of equity. To be made to look like you needed extra help was a concern for many of them. There was a concern that they would be singled out.

> I didn't want to be treated differently. I didn't want to look like I needed help.

These findings show the experiences of these young people and how their parents and whānau, peers and teachers played a large part in their success educationally. They also explore the difficulties these students had with being thought to be "at risk" and some of the lowered expectations that ensued from this categorisation. They lay bare the misguided assumptions that parents of these "type" of students do not value education and, in fact, show a group of students who have substantial pressure put on them to achieve more educationally than their parents did. They explore the importance of school and class cultures that allow the development of peaceful peer relationships where students feel valued and accepted. They also look at the importance of respectful, responsive and tenacious relationships with significant adults at school to allow students to flourish in their learning and learning communities.

Chapter 4: Discussion

School is one of the most – if not the most – important community where "everyday" interactions occur that can make enormous differences to young people's lives. This is a place where students try out their adult selves on the world. While some research puts great stake in relationships with parents, teachers or peers, it seems all are important to young people at this crucial time. It is the constant, year in year out work of schools that can allow young people to move through times of risk and difficulty successfully. It also seems that school is one of the places where these young people have built their story of themselves – and while many had positive experiences, there are also risks of that story becoming one of failure, worthlessness or invisibility. All of these students' stories were complex, with both pain and joy evident in their experiences of school. It is with this in mind that we can see that there is no "silver bullet" to fixing behaviour or schools. School environments are as complex as the people and the lives they bring that fill them. This work allows an insight into students' experiences over this period of their lives, raises some questions and provides some answers about what is working well for young people and what could make a positive difference.

This study focuses on ten young people, who had difficulties early in their school career which threatened their success, and their accounts of what helped them stay at school until Year 13, and gain a qualification. All of their stories involve experience of challenge and difficulty but they also include experience of care, strong connections with peers, positive relationships with significant adults, feelings of being valued, sense of belonging and being able to have a sense of agency in their own lives.

Students' Lives

Whānau and family were crucial factors in students' educational outcomes (Biddulph et al., 2003; Bull et al., 2008) yet secondary schools, particularly, seem to find it difficult to have meaningful, collaborative relationships between home and school. Any assumptions of schools that families of struggling students are unsupportive of education (Bishop et al., 2003; Tns and Monarch Consultancy, 2006) are clearly problematic, particularly for parents who find school intimidating. Students in this study felt that their family and whānau were very supportive of their education, yet if these research studies are to be believed, this is possibly not what the school thought.

Messages from family and whānau

Without fail, students spoke of their families wanting them to do well at school. All of them had parents who had not completed high school and this was a goal that many of the parents had for their child. Across all of the students there seemed to be a family held belief that education will help them live a better life, possibly better than their parents'. There was also an assumption from the students and parents that, with education, young people will be granted more career options, greater earning potential for their future and the possibility to move up a social class, or have a "better" life.

Education seemed to be very strongly linked with future prospects for these families, such as jobs, career and tertiary education. Learning as such did not seem to be mentioned often, only as a means to "success". Parents spoke to their children about very tangible behaviours that would lead to educational

success – attendance, obeying the school rules, taking required gear. These aspects are things the school will readily contact parents about in a pastoral capacity. A number of the students mentioned their families coming in for meetings, receiving letters or phone calls from the school about these things. Aside from these things many of the messages students got from their parents were fairly general ("focus" or "school's important").

Only a few received help at home with their studies and few spoke to their families about what they were learning or working on at school. Yet students speak of their families being very important to their current success. Perhaps the parents felt ill-equipped to be a force in the learning of their child, possibly because they had not completed secondary education or feel that educational changes (such as "the new maths" or NCEA) has made their own learning obsolete. A number of students in this group also had parents who had English as a second language and this may have added to their uncertainty about what their child was learning and how they might help.

Carrying the stories of others – migration and family history

Of the ten participants, two had been brought to New Zealand from another country to improve their prospects in life (one from Samoa and one from Cambodia), and four had parents who were brought to New Zealand from Samoa as children for their education. All of these students seemed to value education, not necessarily just for themselves but also, as a family duty. The discussion around education seemed to hang on their ability to support their own family and possibly extended family.

The students whose parents had not been born in New Zealand talked about the stories their parents had told them about how difficult it was for them to settle in a new country. Some discussed the differing expectations from school and home – one participant's father left school early to help his family financially, another's father found it very hard to settle into the new way of life and language. These stories have stayed with these young people as another example of why they should feel grateful. These stories of sacrifice and struggle of new migrants seem to act as a means of motivation for the young people to continue on at school. With that there was substantial pressure on these young people as it seems that they do not just carry their own desires and goals but also the expectations of their whole family.

One participant who moved to New Zealand at eleven has been taught to value education as a means to finding independence. Her experience was substantially different from the other students', perhaps mirroring that of some of their migrant parents, as the cultural expectations from home and school were more keenly apparent than in many of the other students' lives. She has to negotiate the expectations from home for her to be a "good girl" and a "kiwi girl" at school. This meant she had to traverse a divide between how she was expected to behave, speak and interact with adults at home and a very different set of expectations at school. This student had to maintain different ways of being in each context to find acceptance.

Having the capacity to decide

Many of the participants talked about their own personal motivation in education and this seemed to result in decision-making and actions that supported

positive educational outcomes. This personal motivation was present throughout for some of the students, but for others it took some time to develop. It seems that as students entered the senior years of secondary school (particularly Year 11 and 12) they began to approach school differently. This seems like a logical time for students to change their approach to education as this is the time of senior qualification assessment. Some did not change their approach until Year 12 and it is clear that they felt an increased sense of pressure and failure through year 11 – the first of the senior qualifications years.

Future goals came up as a very important motivator to young people. They equated learning with gaining qualifications and moving into fields of work they would like to in the future. The stage in which this seemed to happen for young people was in Year 11 or 12. This seems to be the time when students become exposed to possibilities of career paths and the courses available to them post-secondary school. There were differing levels of knowledge and understanding of what was needed to reach career pathways for a number of the students. One participant mentioned being a teacher, but this was described as a "dream" rather than a reality for next year. A number of the students did not make any particular reference to what they saw as a pathway for them.

Some of the participants seemed to value education for individualistic reasons such as meeting goals and being able to do things they'd like to in the future. These students seemed clearer about their future and what they would like for it. They had personal goals and seemed to be clearer about how to reach them. It is possible that these students had learned to conduct themselves in a more individualistic and competitive model of education, rather than a communal

model, that is so much more familiar in the cultures of some of the other participants.

A core factor for change for a number of students was the serious consequences they began to experience due to their approach to school in earlier years. Two students particularly said their school difficulties had spilled over into their family life, which had become very unhappy. Both mentioned arguments and conflict at home as a result of school communications about truancy and poor performance, experiencing a lot of negativity from home and school about how things were going.

Two students also felt that there were consequences for their past behaviour when they reached Year 11 and found they were behind in their learning or were not able to take courses they wanted to because of their previous performance. This "failure" was perceived by the students particularly and the consequences were theirs to bear – not their parents'.

One student who experienced these consequences found that he could make the choice who he surrounded himself with, deliberately changing his peer group and both his work ethic and his output.

Peer relationships – outside of class

While some of the students found stable groups of friends early in their time at secondary school, others took longer to find "their place". Students who were involved in extra-curricular activities gravitated towards those interests and people to make connections outside of their classmates. Other students formed friendships by frequenting places where particular activities would be happening in break times.

Out of class community - A place to be yourself

All the students interviewed had places that they went in their own time – lunchtimes and intervals. They usually had a particular activity they would do in this place – a game, or activity they enjoyed with friends. It seemed important that in this space that they students knew who would be there and what would be going on when they got there. Interestingly even though these students are 17 or 18 most of them still spent time playing games with each other over this time. Some students mentioned that certain rituals of greeting made them feel like they belonged and were accepted by their peer group.

The value of extra-curricular opportunities

Sport and extra-curricular activities featured highly as aspects of school life that made a positive contribution to peer relationship – and feeling good at school. Many of the students – particularly but not only the boys – found that sports gave them access to very close friendships. Many mentioned that the sport promoted a team spirit that translated to their relationships at school. They also acknowledged that it became "their thing", something that they could be known

for around the school. It is possible that this team approach also affected their attitudes to learning.

Many of the students spoke about extra-curricular activities in very positive ways. It was clear that these activities had provided the students with an opportunity to spend time with like-minded people (at least in the setting of the activity). Darling, Caldwell and Smith (2005) discuss extra-curricular activities as a means for young people to do identity work. According to Ryan (2000) on peer group socialization, such activities are ways for young people to select friends based around a common value or interest. These extra-curricular activities offered an opportunity for them to receive positive feedback for the quality of their involvement, and this had become defining for a number of students in relation to their sense of who they are – their identity. A number of them clearly felt a sense of pride in themselves and in representing their school in competition.

Participants mentioned that they often felt a sense of encouragement or possibly even pressure from these friends to attend school and to work harder. The grounding of these activities in the school itself seems to add to the positive affect they have of student achievement and peer perceptions of school

Teachers' influence

Teachers and students' relationships with them played a big part in students' school life. Many of them felt there were significant teachers who had helped them stay safe and learning at school.

Teacher student relationships.

Human to human

Students mentioned consistently that they wanted their teachers to speak to them like a person, not just a student. They overwhelmingly enjoyed personal conversations and connections with teachers. They enjoyed finding that they had things in common with their teachers and some mentioned an awareness of their teachers' lives and the respect that they had for them. Some students talked about how some teachers told them their own stories about growing up and their own struggles. Students seemed to appreciate this as it gave them hope and understanding that when things are hard they can get through it, indicating an innate respect for their teachers as having overcome difficulties.

Values of relating

Students appreciated the way their teachers conducted themselves. It seems they are aware of teachers "living their values" and their treatment of others did not go unnoticed. Students appreciated a relationship between them and their teacher that was respectful – being aware that this kind of relationship was reciprocal. In some cases there was a peer decision that a teacher would be respected and they monitored other students' treatment of this teacher, modifying class behaviour if they thought it was disrespectful in any way. Conversely if a teacher is disrespectful to their students by being aggressive or "getting in your face", it was mentioned that there would be a reciprocation of that disrespect also.

There was an underlying gratitude to teachers for giving second chances when students may have squandered earlier opportunities. There was also

acknowledgement of the goodwill of some teachers to offer support in their own time.

Knowing us

Students valued teachers taking time to get to know them. They acknowledged that some teachers made the effort to speak to them one on one and notice them. They appreciated having someone who had made it clear that they would be approachable if a student needed help.

Students believed when teachers "knew" them, they acknowledged them. This could range from acknowledgement in a greeting or asking after them. Students appreciated this greatly and noticed quickly when teachers ignored them, this was taken to mean teachers did not care or were not interested in "knowing" their students. Students felt it was important for teachers to know them well enough to notice and acknowledge their talent and potential.

Teachers should be able to acknowledge the potential of all of their students – requiring them to know them all well enough to do so. Some students thought it is important for teachers to "know" and notice what they do positively to contribute to the school and their learning. As one student said, 'it's important for teachers to notice the positive' even when teachers may be reprimanding them. This understanding may make the criticism more palatable for the student involved. This comes back to the point of teacher and student tenacity. It seems that students appreciated their teachers "sticking" with, and by them, through the course of their education. So when things were not going well teachers could

speak honestly to them with a balanced view of the person, not a totalising view of the person based on current behaviour or actions.

One student, who felt she was not "known" by any of her teachers until last year, appreciated when a teacher spoke to her mother positively about her achievement. This "knowing" her and her potential was very important as previously the overwhelming message her mother had received from the school had been that her child was failing.

Showing care

Teachers were seen to show care by maintaining an approachability along with an assertive, clear manner. Students wanted to learn and complete their work but also knew they could choose not to sometimes. This required effort on the teachers' part to maintain high expectations for their students. This tenacity meant sticking with students throughout their time at school. If things were not working, they wanted someone to talk to them about it honestly, support them in making change and try to help them throughout.

Students spoke at length about teachers showing care for them personally and academically. This was really important to them and their learning. It seems that they take their cues from their teachers about the importance of their learning. If the teacher cared about them getting work completed and gave a consistent message about this expectation, students understood this. It was mentioned by one student that they did not want their teacher to "allow" them to choose to do the work or not. In many ways this contradicts the notion of students' personal responsibility for learning. It may be that students knew that sometimes they may

not make learning the priority if left to their own devices but the teacher provides leadership in this and their expectations need to be constant. This was read by a number of students as their teacher "not giving up on them".

Students also appreciated the expectations of staff around school rules and attendance. This care usually showed itself in follow up. Participants acknowledged that when staff asked after them when they had been truant or out of uniform, it meant that staff wanted them to be in class and learning. They appreciated when they were "caught out" and knew they couldn't get away with this kind of behaviour.

The risk of "at risk" labelling

Students were very much aware of the way their teachers perceived them. Small comments and conversations with teachers were linked with teachers' not expecting anything from them or wanting them to leave school. It was clear that once a teacher had expressed concern in the form of a threat or did not offer any support for a student they knew needed support, the student felt that teacher did not care for them.

There was clear tension between what these teachers and the families of these students believed about them and their potential. Students seemed to have to traverse the uncomfortable space of differing school and parental expectations of them. Few of the students felt that their families had low expectations of them, many in fact stated that their families gave them contradicting messages about staying at school. When families agreed with the school and suggested their children leave school, there was considerable hurt expressed. Students seemed to

feel like they had to prove themselves to family and teachers in these circumstances.

Peer relationships

School played a huge part in these students' peer relationships. Conversely, peer relationships played a huge part in students' remaining at school. School was the key place they made friends. While they had mixed experiences of friendship and peer acceptance in the school, all had made secure attachments to others and these have played a big part in students' positive feelings about school. Many acknowledged that their group of friends had been what made them stay on at school.

In class connections

Students found that there were a number of ways they made friendships within the school and it provided opportunities for them to make peer relationships. Within the classroom there were particular classes and activities that allowed the students to meet, get to know one another and to transfer this friendship outside of the classroom. Talk seems to be the common factor in all students' finding friends at school. Classes where they were allowed or encouraged to talk to one another enabled a more comfortable atmosphere for learning and peer relationships. Students acknowledged that, at times, they were not talking about the learning at hand but they still seemed to value this as part of the class and learning. Interestingly some of the students who mentioned getting in trouble for conduct issues, said it was often for talking too much.

The students' form class seemed to have a major impact on how well students transitioned into high school. This class seemed to be the main place for students to make friends at school. When this class worked well for them, it was a strengthening experience for students, but when it did not, it was evident that students felt much more unsettled at school. Students who had some connections with another person in their class before starting school seemed to fare better, finding the transition into college much easier. Students who did not know anyone in their form class found it brought anxiety and the hard work of gaining acceptance into their first months of secondary school.

Participating in community at school

Certain learning activities featured highly as ways of building social connectedness and bonds. Some students mentioned that some classes had a "family" feel about them. This was particularly in relation to form classes or classes where students worked together a lot.

Students also acknowledged that subjects with a practical component allowed them to build positive relationships that often involved helping one another. This class culture of help and care about work and learning seemed to be beneficial to a number of students as they felt they could get help when they needed it but also that their skill and knowledge was accepted and valued by other members of the class.

Class meetings were a key way that this school endeavoured to build a sense of community and care in classes. Key values of the curriculum and the process were of equity, everyone having a voice and, a commitment to dialogue.

Although there was a level of anxiety from students about aspects of these meetings – time out of class work, speaking in front of others and being put on the spot sometimes by questions – most students felt that the act of all students and teachers being able to speak about their class community in a safe forum was useful and strengthening in some cases even healing.

In class meetings the power differentials between students and teachers seemed to be bridged by the process. Teachers' voices were heard in the same way students' were. These students wanted to hear what their teachers thought and felt about the class. Some felt when they heard the teacher speak in this forum, that it supported positive efforts for change in their class.

Reflecting on what is known about retention and engagement

There are conflicting views from significant parts of the education sector about how best to deal with disengagement and retention. The students interviewed for this study were chosen for their history of disengagement and the perceived risk of non-retention. The overarching message that these students gave was that they wanted to stay at school and they did because they felt they were participants in their own lives at school (had a sense of agency) and in the school community. Most spoke of the importance of peer and student/teacher relationships as crucial to their retention at school. A sense of community and belonging and acceptance in that community made all the difference to their engagement and retention at school.

The stories of this study speak clearly of the importance of a relational paradigm in education. The positive experiences of these young people at school

were based around finding a sense of belonging at school and a place to participate in the school community. This, when married with the OECD discussion of participation in education (Willms, 2003), which shows New Zealand's low levels of participation and sense of belonging in education, suggests that community needs to be made a priority at school through the promotion of community building strategies. These relational practices fit well with the kaupapa of PD initiatives such as Te Kotahitanga (Bishop et al., 2003; 2007) and Restorative Practices (Drewery, 2007; Drewery, 2010; Drewery & Winslade, 2005; International Institute of Restorative Practice, 2007; The Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004) and more widely within the vision and principles of the New Zealand curriculum. However, current government policy seems to show a tendency toward standards and behaviour, undermining a more relational approach as it serves to perpetuate the totalisation of students by academic performance or behaviour. While Positive Behaviour for Learning mentions relationships and culturally responsive measures, its objective is to improve student outcomes. However, students are more than the sum of their behaviour and outcomes and care must be taken so that that is not all they become. The values underlying Positive Behaviour for Learning are primarily individualistic, and as such, not in line with those of relational approaches, which have been shown to make positive differences for students who are "at risk" and have issues with school engagement.

Relationships with adults at school

One of the key factors at school that allowed these young people to make change in their educational outcomes was have a high quality relationship with one or more important adults at school. These relationships involved care, interest

in the person (not just the student), high expectations and teachers modelling positive relationships with students and colleagues. Such relationships allow students to "bounce back" academically (Martin & Marsh, 2009). They knew that if there was a setback, they could recover with support. In this study students also felt that positive relationships with teachers could bring them back from habits of truancy, some noting that when teachers spoke to them out of interest in their well-being and said they would like to see them in class next period, they felt compelled to go.

The possibility of disappointing a teacher who shows care for a student seems to be capable of changing behaviour (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Davis & Dupper, 2004). This is a testament to the power of good teacher-student relationships. When a student truants, it may be a violation of the rules of the school (and in fact the land), however it is also a violation of their relationship with the teacher of that class. When that teacher discusses it in this context and reaches out a hand of care to that student, rather than one of exclusion, it makes it possible for them to return. Truancy is often viewed as one of the ultimate indicators of disengagement and for teachers to be able to speak to students about their truancy in an open way that will invite them back, would show that they still believe in their potential to succeed. Many students in this study spoke of teachers who "never gave up" on them. This is certainly a challenge but if students are to feel worthy and respected in the classroom, this is a prerequisite to learning (Bondy, et al., 2007; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Hill & Hunt, 2000). This should not be misconstrued as teachers being easy on their students, being their "friend" or letting them decide what is best all the time. The students in this study appreciated teachers who would speak to them in an authoritative way and would demand

accountability from them (Brown, 2004; Delpit, 1988). Students saw this as being assertive and felt it was necessary for their teachers to be able to do this in a classroom context, it was also a means to communicate the high expectations they had for them. Students seemed to be able to accept reprimand more if it was tempered this with acknowledgement and care.

Student descriptions of positive teachers fit well with Hill and Hunt's (2000) description of successful teachers in low decile schools. These teachers showed an interest in "who" students were and what they brought with them (background, culture and language) and that respect was reciprocal. Students in this current study seemed keenly aware of teachers' respect or lack of it in relationship. Where students spoke of teachers being disrespectful, they judged them harshly, clearly expecting more from their teachers than that. Implicit in this seems to be a deep respect for teaching as a profession and the expectation that teachers will display the values that these students strive for.

The way teachers conducted themselves in relationship had impacts on the way students conducted themselves in reciprocation. As one student said if a teacher yelled at them, or "got in their face" (behaviours not acceptable for students to partake in either) they would respond in an equally negative way. It seems that the construction of a class community where teachers and students have the same goals, where they are together rather than against one another goes a long way to make for positive learning relationships in the classroom. The sense of a teacher being there through success and difficulty gave students the security to make mistakes and learn from them, rather than fearing failure.

Teaching as a means to build participation and belonging

As mentioned earlier "talk" seems to be one of the key ways students learn together and make meaningful connections together. Some students want a silent, individualised work environment but these students are not the only ones in today's classrooms. The students interviewed said they needed to be able to discuss leaning, what they are doing and generally talk about their lives with their peers. If the learning agenda is only content-based, such talking is not necessary; but if it is based around key competencies and improving young people's ability to contribute to the wider community, then we need to listen to this. Ultimately students need a greater sense of belonging and participation at school to improve student achievement and retention (Willms, 2003). The building of communities of care must become a higher priority.

Positive peer relationships in the classroom need grounding in social acceptance for students to feel safe and feel a sense of belonging (Wetzel & Caldwell, 1997). Teachers and schools can prioritise ways that students can get to know and accept one another in a class setting. Students could clearly identify classes where they felt safe and accepted. They spoke of these classes with pleasure and a sense of satisfaction. Many were described as having the feeling of family. Instruction that allowed for group work and peer teaching occurred in these classes but one must ask whether these activities would have been so successful if students had not felt this sense of belonging and safety in this class first.

The use of the restorative class meeting was acknowledged as a tool for building community and acceptance of one another in the classroom. Students

almost unanimously enjoyed the opportunity to hear the opinions and feelings of every member of their class. They had a sense of greater understanding of one another. They felt it modelled equity, balancing out the power differentials that occur in every class. It seems that through these meetings, students developed skills in listening and acknowledging others and skills of speaking their views and opinions in community. Ultimately this is an authentic setting for teaching key competencies that relate to community and participation (Gray & Drewery, 2011) and peaceful ways of managing community in the school, and difficulties within it (Cavanagh, 2003; Drewery, 2007, 2010; Drewery & Kecskemeti, 2010; Drewery & Winslade, 2005).

School relationships with parents and whānau

The young people in this study entered secondary school knowing that their parents and whānau had very high expectations of their engagement in school. While many of these parents and whānau knew when things went wrong with rule infringements, few had meaningful conversations about their children's learning with their teachers. As Biddulph et al. (2003) argue, parental expectations have a positive impact on their children's success at school and in some of the cases in this study, served as a foil to sometimes lower expectations at the school. What seemed to be missing from this was a partnership between home and school. Biddulph et al. (2003) and Bull et al. (2008) found that a much more collaborative approach from the school to parents and whānau resulted in the best outcomes for young people. This involved a common language about learning. While reports were sent home, some students mentioned that their parents took them to mean that their child was failing at school rather than suggesting what would improve their learning outcomes.

Students' awareness of their parents' expectations seemed to be quite distant from what was actually occurring at school. While Biddulph et al. (2003) acknowledge that parental expectation is positive for achievement, they found that achievement can be maximised by much more collaborative communication between home and school. Many secondary schools have some way to go on this relationship building. This school sent home letters about truancy or misbehaviour (that one student said he would try to hide from his mother), reports three times a year and hosted report evenings where parents came for five minute interviews with each of their child's teachers. For some of the parents and whānau of these students, only negative communication went home about their children's efforts at school. Students mentioned that some of their parents believed they were failing school and saw little value in their child continuing with education, in spite of their child and their own wishes for them to stay on. The flipside of this is the "feel good" effect that Otunuku and Brown (2007) discuss, that seems to be at play also with some of these students' experience with school. One student frequently could not ask for help from her teachers and consequently wasn't completing work. It was when she truanted that her parents knew something was wrong as then the school contacted her parents.

It seems that some schools may be passing over the valuable resource of parents' dedication to and expectations of their children's education. The traditional report evening where parents go from teacher to teacher hearing possibly very brief reports about their child show no real commitment to collaboration from schools. All of the students in this study reported that their parents wanted them to get the best education they can, however schools often

perceive parents' absence from parent interview evenings as disinterest or lack of support for their child's education. This misconception of parents' commitment to their children's education is clear in the Tns, Monarch Consultancy report to the Ministry of Education about early school leavers (2006), where they found many principals thought the parents of early leavers were unsupportive of education.

"At risk" – a disrespectful label?

The experiences of these young people of being labelled "at risk" were difficult for them. All students perceived that they were so categorised but with that categorisation came different behaviours from those around them, depending on why they were named "at risk". Students who had diagnosed learning difficulties or English was a second language were given substantial extra supports (teacher aide support or were taken out of class for extra tuition groups). However students who had been labelled "at risk" because of behaviour or truancy received much more negative responses. They were aware of supports from pastoral care networks in the school but classroom teachers were not perceived to offer support.

Within this group, seven of the ten students are Māori or Pasfika. On reflection it begs the question are we more readily labelling students as "at risk" due to culture? This is concerning as this can (and possibly already has) become the dominant story of cultural groups' relationship with education. Many of them seemed to face high expectations (perhaps to a point of hyper-vigilance) in terms of compliance with school rules but lower expectations in relation to learning (Otunuku & Brown, 2007). Ultimately this adds to the deficit theorising that Te Kotahitanga, Ka Hikitia and The Pasifika Education Plan (Bishop et al., 2007;

Ministry of Education, 2009, 2009a) are working to change in our education system.

Most students perceived that they had been judged and that they were then removed from the possibility of being the "good student" or "high achiever". It seems that a number of students had "problem-saturated" stories developed about themselves at school (Madigan, 1998, p. 25). These stories were emphasised by others who contributed to this story by giving students the message that they were wasting people's time, should leave school or had no potential to achieve or gain anything from school. There was also evidence of student perception of fear or expectation of "gang mentality" from young people. The fact that these students did not fulfil these low expectations for them was due to the other protective factors that school provided for them, such as a significant relationship with a teacher and opportunities to build connections with others. They also seemed to be bolstered by very positive views of education and their potential to do well from their families.

There was evidence from all students that they were aware that they had developed independence over this time and had been allowed to take up an agentive position in their lives (Drewery, 2005).Yet it appears that in their earlier years of secondary school, they were not always able to do so. Others seemed to feel that they were unable to decide for themselves or participate in important conversations about their lives because of their "at risk" status. What seemed to change were significant teachers and classes that opened up opportunities for the taking up of an agentic position.

Implications for policy, schools and practice

Policy

Governmental policy decisions have wide reaching impacts on schools, students and teachers. Some would say we are still learning how to deal with the change in student teacher learning relationships after corporal punishment was abolished over twenty years ago. Strategies and initiatives have far reaching implications for practice but so also have the ways in which the values of these strategies can seep into the values behind education in this country. The New Zealand Curriculum, Te Kotahitanga and Restorative Practices have been instrumental in focussing teachers on the importance of relationships and the innate respect that must be shown to build a high quality relationship. These sit well with the underlying values of the Pasifika Education Strategy and *Ka Hikitia*. These two strategies require teachers and schools to take students as they come, accepting and valuing them as individuals, as culturally situated and as part of their whānau and extended community.

A changing focus to managing behaviour shifts the kaupapa of teachers' relationships with students from that of reciprocity and responsiveness to that of identifying and analysing behaviour. Positive Behaviour for Learning may in fact undermine some of the important work already done by other well-established professional development projects. Students (and teachers for that matter) are more than just their behaviours. The over emphasis on infringements of rules rather than relationships fails to see that students care less about the rules than they do the people they are in community with.

Positive Behaviour for Learning may be trying to move to a place where the "behaviour is the behaviour, the person is not the behaviour" but it may in fact work in the opposite way, where the behaviour is totalising of the person. The behaviour leads to the instrumentalisation or subjectification of people to systems and to what those in power dictate as being best for them. Once again this will be a situation where young people's agency is minimised, along with the agency of their whānau and their teachers. This is contrary to the values of the curriculum and culturally responsive practices.

School systems

Parent/whānau engagement

There are some gaps between whānau and school in terms of communication and collaboration for positive outcomes for young people. Both want the same thing but there seems to be a mismatch between what and how that might be achieved. Many secondary schools would say they struggle to get whānau involvement, particularly when it comes to students who need support. It is clear that many parents do not feel comfortable coming into school without an invitation. The students' families in this study appeared to send their children to school to be "transformed" into people who can have a better life than they have. While the school felt that the students were not adequately supported by their families, expecting them to be able to come into school or help their students in ways that may seem foreign to them.

A more holistic and culturally respectful way of meeting parents is in order; to discuss students' learning and provide realistic and specific ways parents can help their children's achievement at home. While some written

communication is certainly needed, in a diverse community the value of this form of communication needs to be questioned when a number of parents do not have strong literacy in English (such as migrant parents). Setting up a face to face, one on one meeting with parents early into a student's transition into secondary school would allow for more useful and timely communication between home and school. This would also make it a lot easier for whānau to come into school if they perceive problems at home or want to help their children achieve. Schools' perception of families not being supportive of education seems to be largely unfounded and with closer home-school collaboration, this could go some way to unravel some of the myths of disengagement that plague families, sadly particularly those of Māori and Pasifika students. However it is also likely that the issues informing their relationship with education are very different for Māori parents.

Wider school culture and opportunities

Aspects of school culture and activities can build positive peer relationships. Extra-curricular activities worked to improve students' sense of identity, belonging and participation in school life. These activities are largely undervalued by schools and rely on the goodwill of teachers and community members who run them. That these activities are a place where students made positive connections and developed a sense of pride in their contribution to school life should not go unnoticed. Often in a school students may get punished by being removed from extra-curricular activities, but this seems counter-productive. This is one of the many exclusionary practices that schools frequently use, at a time when students may need more support rather than made to feel excluded. These practices do little to improve engagement and retention and tend to

marginalise students further. Extra-curricular activities are also seen as a chore for teachers and many activities struggle to find adequate adult organisers or help. I fear that this may result in schools cutting back on the activities they offer or limiting student numbers. The results of this study suggest that if every student participated in some form of extra-curricular activity, there would be a much greater sense of belonging amongst our student population.

Teacher practice

Teachers that were well-regarded and respected by these students were not the "cool" teachers, or these students' friends. These staff had a comfortable identity as teachers and this allowed them to be known by these young people as teacher and human. It is important to note that these students did not want their teachers to try to be anyone other than who they were as long as they could maintain a professional demeanour, show care and interest and have high expectations for them. Often there seems to be confusion about what a positive relationship between teacher and student might look like and this can be clouded with expectations of "friendship" or acts of extreme care, such as teachers being contactable by cell phone outside of school hours or available for any crisis. These students had no expectation of this kind of relationship with their teacher but did expect a level of commitment and hope from their teachers at school. Many teachers starting out in their careers (and some after that time too), struggle with defining what a positive relationship is with their students and can find that their too permissive or too strict approach is in fact undermining to these relationships. The need for teachers to be assertive without being aggressive is essential and appreciated by students.

Training teachers to build communities and deal with problems within community show a way ahead that is sustainable and also meets the vision of our new curriculum. The notion of behaviour management is something that must be discussed but it is merely a beginning, not an end to creating positive relationships and class communities. It is this latter work that seems to have made a substantial difference these students' experience of school and made school a place of protective factors for them. At this school Restorative Practices made a positive difference to class communities when there were problems, and enabled the teachers of those classes to remain in relationship with their students.

Teachers need to take care with the way they judge and discuss students. There is no doubt that risk is part of young people's lives. Schools need to be aware of this and take care to help students through trying times, yet it is also important to acknowledge the strength and the protective factors young people also bring with them. Teachers and education professionals need to be aware of the language they use and their assumptions about their students because of culture and class. It is much easier to see risk in a student's life if they are already socially marginalised because of these factors. Totalising language about students has become common place in the sector and can have very detrimental effects on student self-image, hope, their outcomes and the expectations others hold for them.

Limitations of the Study

This study was carried out in one school with ten students from the same year group. While it reveals generalisations, these students' experiences of systems, teaching practices and initiatives are of this school only. Elements of the

school's character (for example its commitment to restorative practices) and the way it organises its curriculum and pastoral care system (for example the availability of specialist classes, and the use of form classes) impacted on these students' success. However, the study does throw light on some of the elements of these programmes and organisational effects that were perceived to be successful and discussed. These elements could be transferred into other programmes in other schools.

This was in retrospect so students may have looked back on their experiences with feelings that may differ from what they had at an earlier time in their education. Within those years many students had felt a much greater sense of belonging at school later in their education, which may have impacted on their feelings towards school and staff at the school. This may also be a strength of the study as students are close enough to the experience to remember it well but also so have the maturity to consider it as part of their journey.

Ideas for Further Study

While this study very broadly covered a myriad of topics as they arose from students' stories, there is much that could be looked into more deeply.

Parental contact and relationships seemed to be very much overlooked by the school and students barely touched on the relationship their parents had with the school. There is certainly work to be done to look at the impact of closer contact with parents and whānau and if messages do conflict, how that impacts on a young person.

Pastoral care, the work of deans, form teachers, etc., is mentioned frequently by these young people as important to them. Interestingly it is rarely acknowledged and little work has been done into the value of this work. This school had a relatively high rate of truancy and deans had substantial contact with students and their whānau about attendance. The form teacher and teacher roles in pastoral care are often overlooked but are mentioned by the participants of this study as very important to them.

While this study only alludes to it in passing, there needs to be work looking at the impact of low level Restorative Practices on building community. At present the Ministry of Education's focus of Restorative Practices has been on reducing suspensions and stand downs but this rarely touches your average students' lives. There are calls to implement lower level practices (restorative chats, circles, etc.) but the impact of this is harder to measure than a rate of stand downs.

Alongside this, the introduction of Positive Behaviour for Learning raises questions about how this initiative may interact with already established programmes, such as Te Kotahitanga and Restorative Practices. Further research into its impact on engagement and retention at secondary school would also be important.

How do Schools Support Students to Stay at School When They are in the Category "At Risk"?

These students spoke with clarity about what made school possible for them: people. While many of the things they said were not new to educationalists

(e.g. the need for teachers to be assertive, connected to their students, etc.) the overarching message about how important people were to their education and daily school life is striking. While sometimes learning and learning activities were spoken about, often these activities involved other people and that helped make the learning more meaningful to these young people.

These voices speak of the importance of community and finding a place for yourself in that community, a place to stand, where your mana holds. They speak of ways school and learning has helped build this. These activities are core to good teaching and learning, and also for the retention and engagement of students who may be considered “at risk”.

Epilogue

"Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all' – Aristotle

I had always believed that "we teach students, not subjects" and have felt a level of discomfort at assertions (from experienced colleagues) that content must be paramount. My memories of my own secondary schooling were of people, not lessons. As a learner my interest and understanding came from discussion and stories, the stuff of community and collective understanding. While in my teaching career the subject I taught (English) had some interesting content and some literature I loved, I realised early on that I was there to teach the people, not the book or the grammar. No student should leave school the same as they came in. But no teacher should either. Our stories intertwine and we touch each other's lives in very positive and negative ways sometimes.

This project came into being from my work as a dean of a year group in a secondary school. This job began with these students in Year 9 and finished when they leave at the end of Year 13. It turned out to be a job that I valued greatly as it allowed me to get to know a very diverse group of young people well. As a classroom teacher I had got to know some students well but this changed with different years, classes. In this job it was a long haul and commitment to these young people for a stretch of five years changed the way I saw them. The length of my relationship with them meant that I saw them come into the school as children and leave as young adults. This has been one of the greatest experiences of my career.

When I reflect on the journeys of strength and determination that these young people have been on (and continue on), I now see what I was trying to understand in my struggling first years of teaching. School has been so much more than a site for academic achievement, it has been a site for education of heart, education of will and of deep personal transformation for these young people. These young people's stories are complex and full of struggle. They were people, never just bad behaviour or an "at risk" student, less likely to succeed. To have known them, witness them grow and finally witness their stories has been a gift.

When I reflect on these students' stories, I can also reflect on my own. I came to this job with the desire to teach well but I wish I had known what I know now. Teaching is a craft that takes practice, honest reflection and a commitment to continue learning. The way we teach exposes our values to the audience of our students, so the more reflection we do about our values and how we live by them, the more respected we will be as teachers. This work has made me reflect on my own assumptions and understandings of young people and how they have impacted on my views of their potential and possibilities. Teaching well requires the utmost respect for yourself, the students and their whānau.

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Appendix 1: Covering Letter

7 February 2011

Dear (student's name)

As you know I am currently one of the year 13 deans at Aotea College. This year I will be studying to gain a Masters Degree from Waikato University in Education. I am sending you this letter to invite you to be one of the participants in my study.

I would like to interview a group of ten students, such as yourself, who have been at the college since Year 9. As a student you may have faced some challenges over this time or changed your approach to education at some stage over these years. I would like to interview you individually to ascertain what factors contributed to your current educational success. By success I am noticing that you have stayed at college into Year 13 and have achieved at least a Level One qualification. I am particularly interested in whether your relationships with teachers have contributed in any way to your success and what you have noticed about the teachers who have successful relationships with students. A smaller group of students (four to five) will be invited to participate in a group discussion to clarify ideas that may have risen from the interviews. I will analyse what you tell me in the interviews and discussion, for my research. I would also like to stress that this research is not undertaken as a dean or member of staff at the school but for my own study. It will hopefully contribute to better understanding by teachers of what helps students to succeed.

The interviews would be sound-recorded and the group discussion video-recorded. After looking at the recordings I would write a report about what all the students I interview told me about how they overcame difficulties at school to become a successful student, and what (if anything) teachers did to help with this. This report may include elements of each student's personal stories and may involve discussion of background, personal interests and values. Your identity will be protected by changing names and fragmenting stories to make them untraceable.

The information will be used to inform other education professionals of how teachers' relationships with students may have helped them succeed at school and how these high quality relationships were built. At the end of this process I will give you a letter acknowledging your story of success for you to keep.

I would really like to hear your story and hope that you will agree to take part in my study. Please take this home and discuss it with your parents. If you agree to take part, would you (and your parent if you wish) sign the consent form enclosed and return it to me. You can leave it at the office in an envelope addressed to me. If you or your parents want to know more about this, or you have any concerns or questions, please contact me at school, or ring: _____ or you can email me _____ to make a time and place. If you have any problem with what I am asking, please contact the school Principal, Tim Davies-Colley, or (preferably), my university supervisor Wendy Drewery at the address given in the letterhead.

If you do not wish to participate, that is okay too. Just give the letter back to me.

Yours sincerely

Sheridan Gray

Appendix 2: Informed Consent: Student

I (student's name) _____consent to participate in Sheridan Gray's research project. I understand that the data from the interview could be , used in subsequent presentations or publications.

I understand that the research will involve the use of recorded interviews and some videoed recordings of a group discussion. This will involve Sheridan Gray analysing these interviews and discussion to find out whether teachers have helped students to succeed at school.

I understand I will be able to listen to recordings or view the video at any stage. The findings of the research will be presented next year. I understand the research will not use my name and that every care will be taken to disguise my identity. Under no circumstance will names, identities or any personal details be shared with anyone else.

I also understand that I can withdraw at any time up till Sheridan offers me the draft to look at. I consent to participate in this study.

Student's Name: _____
Student's signature: _____
Date: _____

Parent's Name (if required): _____
Parent's signature: _____
Date: _____

Researcher Contact Details: Sheridan Gray
E-mail: _____
Phone_____

University Supervisor: Dr Wendy Drewery, Faculty of Education, University of Waikato. Phone 07 838 4500, Email w.drewery@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix 3: Participant Interview Questions

All of these questions may not be asked of each participant but this indicative list covers the possible paths the interview may take.

Introduction:
When I knew you earlier in your schooling, we were concerned that you might have struggled to stay in school until Year 13. I'm interested in how you managed to be so educationally successful.

1. How would you describe your journey through school? Was it easy, or hard, were there times when it was harder than others? What was happening at those times? Do you know why this was happening? (particularly truancy, conduct issues, etc.) How did this impact on your learning? How did it impact on your feelings about school?

2. So what has helped you stay in school when things seemed to be against you? How is it that you have managed to stay in school when sometimes things seemed to be against you?

3. **Students' Background**
   - What are your values and beliefs about education?
   - Where would you say you learned these?
   - Would you describe your family as supportive of your education?
   - In what ways have they shown support?
   - Are there other people in your life outside of school that have shown support or guidance in your education?
   - Have any particular experiences outside of school encouraged your success at school?

4. **Relationships with Peers within the school**.
   - Have there been significant relationships with your peers that have helped you stay in school and succeed?
   - How were these relationships built?
   - Did the school provide opportunities for these relationships to grow?
   - Were there any classes where you developed strong relationships with your peers?
   - Were there any classes where you developed a deeper understanding of your peers?
   - n these classes, what was done to develop these relationships?
   - Were there things the teacher/s did that improved these relationships?
   - Did class meetings improve the way your classmates related to one another?
   - Were there times when conflict was dealt with well?
   - What things occurred that made it easier for people to move on?

5. Relationships with Teachers.
   - Have there been significant relationships with your teachers that have helped you stay and school and succeed?
   - How would you describe these relationships?
   - How was this relationship important to you and your success?

- How was this relationship built?
- Were there things the teacher did to improve this relationship?
- Were there things that the teacher did to help you reflect on your learning? What did they do?
- Did class meetings help you reflect on your approach to learning and make change?
- Did the way a teacher spoke to you allow you to improve your learning or approach to school? What kinds of things did they say?
- How did this improve your approach to school or learning?

Appendix 4: Example of a letter to participants after interviews

9 July 2011

Dear ,

This letter is to acknowledge your story of how you stayed at college. You have faced some difficult challenges at school over the years and have managed to stay and get qualifications. This is a story of success.

You talked about how when you started college you misbehaved in class and as you got older you realised that, because of this, you were behind in your work. You said when you got to college you had to fit in and the boys were twice your size. This was something you had to get used to. You said a major change happened for you when you ended up in a form class with students you didn't really know and you decided to sit with people who got the work done.

Family and background

You acknowledged that your family have talked to you a lot about your education and how to live your life well. They've taught you to be nice to people, be honest, to work hard and manage your time. They've taught you about being independent because your granny and grandpa can't support you forever. You also mentioned that they have supported your learning by paying your school fees and being strict about you doing your homework and finishing all of your work.

You also acknowledged your granddad as having been important to you in Year 11. You said he'd really encouraged you to work hard – and that he'd always been a hard worker himself (retiring at 75) – and he'd told you "you don't go to school to eat your lunch". This example of hard work and enjoying work seems to have been important to you.

You talked about how at this time – the end of year 10 and start of year 11 – you realised that you needed to have education to get a decent job.

Teachers and staff

You mentioned that you'd had a lot of difficulties with your teachers over the years. You mentioned that you felt the deans were ok, not too slack or strict. You knew that if you wagged a few periods you'd be checked up on and knew you couldn't get away with it. You also acknowledged that you appreciated when teachers saw you around and asked you to make sure you came to their class. You felt overall, in spite of the difficulties, that many of the teachers had really helped you out. You acknowledged that they didn't take it personally.

Overall you appreciated it when teachers would treat you as a person and discuss things with you like sports or what's going on in the world. You felt if a teacher was aggressive that you'd react badly but you felt this rarely happened. You liked situations where you were allowed to talk – about the work too – and you were still expected to get your work done. You didn't like it if a teacher didn't care if you did the work, it was important that they had high expectations of you.

You talked about Mr K and how he had high expectations of you. You talked about how when he caught you wagging, he would not just tell you off, but also walk you to your class so there was no way to get out of going. You also acknowledged that you liked his honest advice in the class meetings.

Peers

You talked about how you have had a number of friends since you were in primary school. You felt that they have had a big impact on your education and that they've really encouraged you to stay at school and helped you understand how important education will be to get a career that you want.

You talked about how your form class – 13ZZ – has been really special to you. You felt completed by the class and described it as a family ever since Year 9. You said that's particularly why you didn't want to go to another class last year. You felt that being in the same class together all the time in the junior school brought you all together. You also mentioned that the people in the class always treated each other well – like brothers and sisters.

Overall you talked about how you felt valued and that you belong at school. This was really apparent to you at lunchtimes when you go out to meet your friends on the courts and they shake your hand. You said you felt really valued by your mates. You also said that you're known around the school for playing football and when people ask about when you'll next play, etc. that you're acknowledged for this.

You mentioned that you had been part of class meetings quite a lot. You thought sometimes it might have been because of your behaviour in class but mostly if there'd been too much talking in the class. You felt they were useful but found parts difficult. You said you found the pressure when lots of questions were asked was difficult and sometimes you weren't sure what was being asked. You felt overall they were useful and afterwards everyone told each other to do their work. You noticed when other teachers came to the meeting and you liked how the teacher got to speak about what they wanted from the class. You also acknowledged that the quiet students in a class got a chance to speak. Overall you described it as a form of team bonding. You felt that it helped you understand each other's goals.

I'd like to acknowledge you and your story _____. You have said that you'd made improvements every year since Year 9 in your behaviour and work completion. You made specific choices to make sure you achieved – who you had as friends and associated with, counting and making sure you got your credits in Level one. You talked about how you tried to be yourself at college and that you now feel that you belong and are accepted for who you are. Your story really shows the importance of good decisions and how being confident and positive has really paid off for you. As a person who has taught you in year 9 and then in year 11, I have seen you fly and succeed. Thank you for telling me your story.

Yours sincerely

Sheridan